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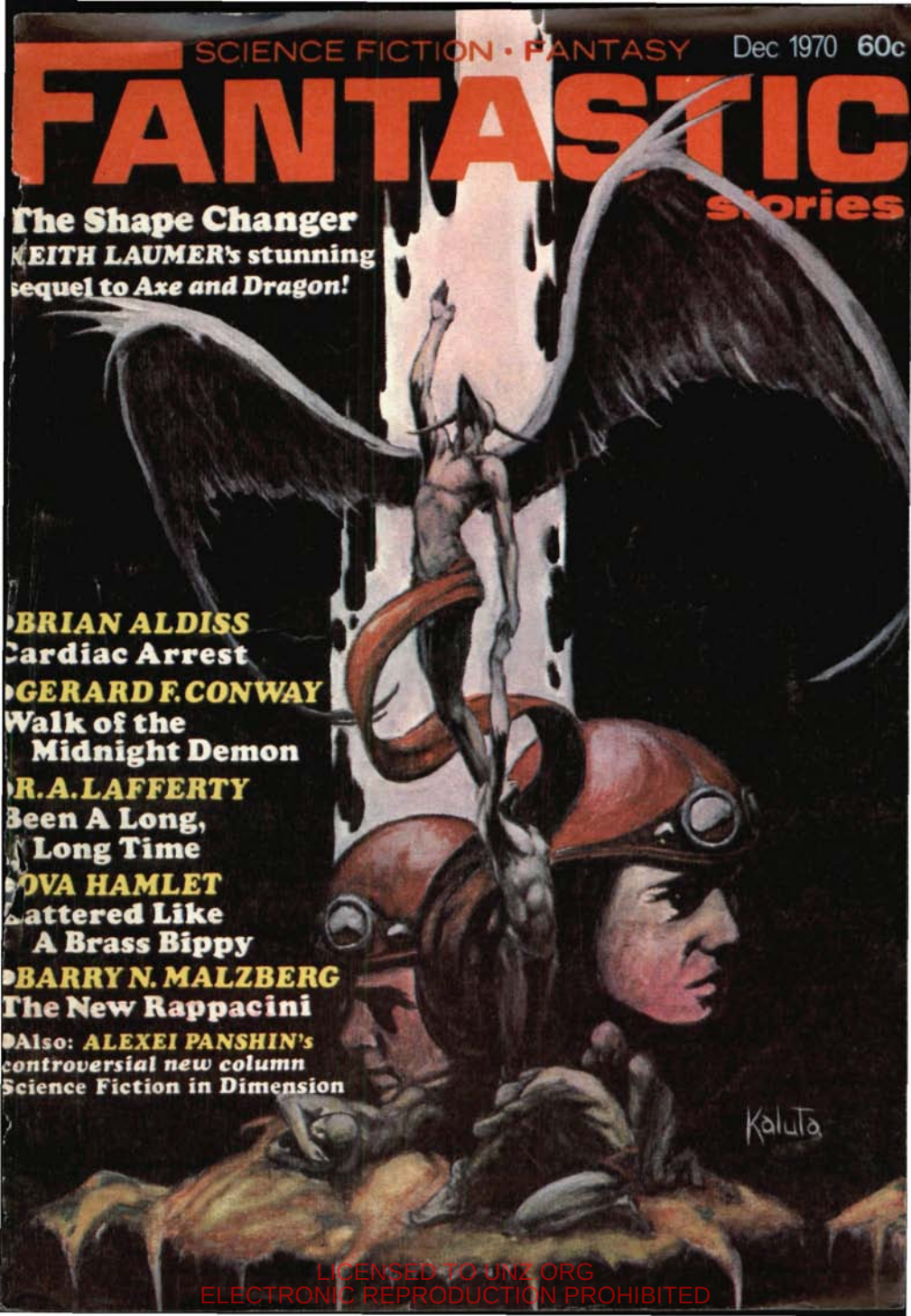
FANTASTIC stories

The Shape Changer
KEITH LAUMER's stunning sequel to *Axe and Dragon!*



BRIAN ALDISS
Cardiac Arrest

GERARD F. CONWAY
Walk of the Midnight Demon

R. A. LAFFERTY
Been A Long, Long Time

OVA HAMLET
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FANTASTIC

DECEMBER, 1970 Vol. 20, No. 2

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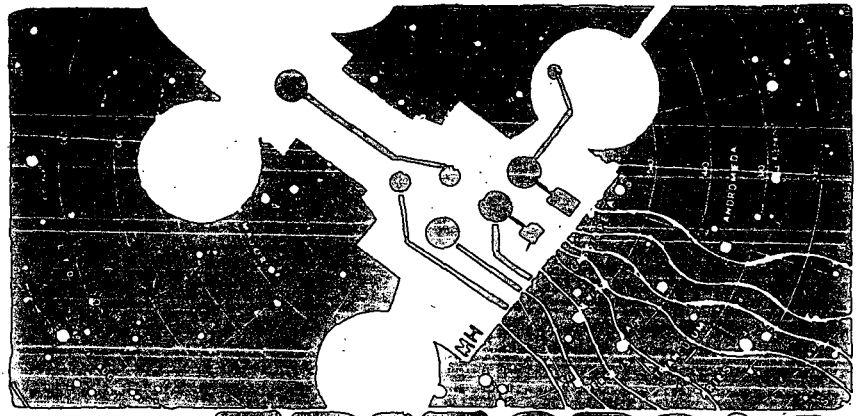

TED WHITE: EDITORIAL

Our cover this issue marks Mike Kaluta's debut in that form, but he's been doing illustrations for us since early this year—his first illustrations were for John Brunner's "The Wager Lost by Winning" in our April issue (and, yes, we have another of John's Traveler in Black novelettes coming up soon)—and your letters indicate that Mike is already one of our most popular artists.

Since we returned to original covers and began using artists like Kaluta, Jeff Jones and Mike Hinge for our interior illustrations, I've received queries from an increasing number of artists eager to appear in AMAZING and FANTASTIC. In fact, quite suddenly I have more artists than I can handle.

I suppose the turning point was our decision to revise our reprint policy and move into the present format. This called for more original art—since we were using more new stories—and at that point I began casting about among artists of my acquaintance.

I met Jeff Jones in 1966, the year in which he first showed his paintings in the artshow of the World S.F. Convention. Soon after that convention he moved to New York, determined to break into a professional career as an artist. My initial contacts with him were through Larry Ivie, an old friend and presently the editor/publisher of *Larry Ivie's MONSTERS AND HEROES*. I believe Larry was among the first to publish Jeff professionally in his magazine. In any event, Jeff worked with me on the still-borne *STELLAR* project and when I assumed the editorship of these magazines I had him in mind. The only problem was that in the intervening period Jeff had become enormously successful and was in heavy demand as a cover artist for the paperback book publishers. Suddenly he was out of our reach.

In the meantime, Mike Hinge had become a contributor. I first met Mike in 1958 at the World S.F. Convention in Los

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 142)

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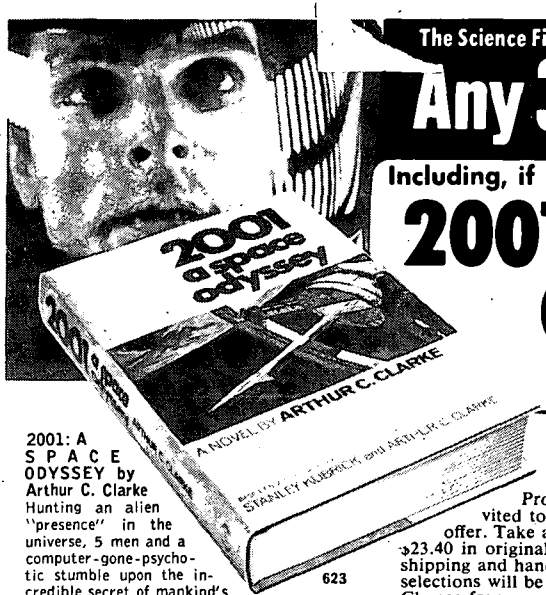

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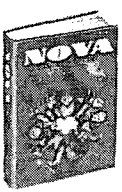

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THE SHAPE CHANGER

(First of Two Parts)

Lafayette O'Leary first appeared in these pages in "Axe and Dragon," serialized in the November, 1965, January and March, 1966 issues. The novel was subsequently published in book form as The Time Bender. *In that story, Lafayette learned that he could warp probability loci with his mind —and found himself in the medieval kingdom of Artesia. Ultimately he learned that he belonged there and had indeed been born there—and Probability Central focussed a Suppressor upon him to keep him pinned down where he belonged, a fate with which he was not unsatisfied. But things have a way of happening to O'Leary, Probability Suppressor or not, as Keith Laumer reveals in this long-awaited sequel . . .*

KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by MICHAEL KALUTA

THE MOON shone bright on the palace gardens as Sir Lafayette O'Leary stepped stealthily forth from the scullery entrance. Silently, he tiptoed along the gravelled path which led beneath a rhododendron hedge, skirting the royal Artesian vegetable garden and winding past the chicken yard, where a sleepy hen clucked irritably at his passing. At the street gate he paused to glance back at the dark towers looming against the cloud-bright sky. A faint light shone behind the windows of his third floor apartment. Up there Daphne was curled between silken sheets, waiting for him. He had sent her off to bed alone, telling her he'd join her as soon as he'd perused another chapter of his newest book on Mesmerickal Science; instead, here he was, creeping out like a thief in the night, on his way to a stealthy rendezvous with a person or persons unknown—all because of that ridiculous note he'd found tucked under the napkin accompanying his after-dinner drink.

He pulled the grubby scrap of paper from his pocket, reread it by the dim glow from a lamp in a bracket on the wall.

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Deer Sir Laffeyet,
I doant sea you in kwite a wile, but you bin on my mind plenty. The reezin I rite you this letter is, I got holt of a item witch its two big to handle aloan. I cant sa no more now, wich some fink mite get holt of it and steel a march on us. But meat me at midnite at Ye Axe and Draggin, an I will fill you in.
X (His mark)

"It must be from the Red Bull," Lafayette told himself. "Nobody else could spell as creatively as this. But why the cloak-and-poinard approach? You'd think he was still cutting purses for a living, instead of being a lionized hero with the royal pardon and the Order of the Dragon for his services to the crown. Which suggests that he's up to his old tricks. It's probably some wild scheme for counterfeiting quarters, or turning base metal into gold. If I had good sense, I'd turn around right now and forget the whole thing . . ."

But instead of turning back, he thrust the note into his pocket and let himself out the gate. Here in the narrow side street, the wind seemed more chill, bearing with it a whiff from the palace sty, where a pair of prize China pigs awaited the next feast day. Lafayette heard a mournful snort as he passed. In the far corner of the enclosure, George, the four-hundred-pound boar, huddled against the wall, as if recoiling from the advances of the scarcely less bulky Jemimah.

"Poor George," Lafayette murmured. "Maybe you've been cursed with too much imagination—like me."

At that moment, George seemed to catch his eye. With a frantic lunge he eluded the amorous sow, scrambled toward Lafayette, making piteous

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gobbling sounds.

"Don't make the same mistake I do, George, of not appreciating what you've got while you've got it," Lafayette advised the giant hog as it attempted unsuccessfully to rear up against the fence only to fall back with a loud *squelch!* into the mud.

"Go to Jemimah, tell her you're sorry, and forget the inevitable barbecue—" Lafayette broke off as George hurled himself at the fence, eliciting an ominous creak from the stout boards.

"Shhh!" he hissed. "You'll rouse the palace guards! Be sensible, George. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may . . ." But as he hurried off along the dark street, the mournful sounds followed him.

Only a few of the leaded glass windows set in the half timbered gables overhanging the cobbled street showed lights; the honest folk of the capital were abed at this hour. Only dubious characters like himself—and the man he was going to meet—were abroad now, Lafayette reflected guiltily. In the distance he heard the *haloo* of a city watchman making his rounds, the barking of a dog, the tinkle of a bell. A steam-carriage rumbled past the intersection ahead, a red lantern swaying at its tailgate, its iron-shod wheels groaning against the paving blocks. Beyond, he saw a sign-board bearing a familiar device: the prow of a Viking ship and a two-handed battle-axe. Below it was a low, wide oaken door, iron bound, with heavy strap hinges. The sight brought back piquant memories. The Axe and Dragon had been the scene of his arrival in Artesia some years before—transported instantaneously from Colby Corners, USA, by the Psychic Energies focussed by the Hypnotic Art, as described by Professor Doktor Hans Joseph Schimmerkopf in his massive volume on Mesmeric Science. It had also been the scene of his immediate arrest by the King's musketeers on a charge of sorcery, brought about by his careless decanting of several gallons of vintage wine from a one-liter bottle. He had managed to quash the indictment only by the desperate expedient of promising to slay a dragon. Well, in the end he had slain the dragon—one of them. The other had become his pet and favorite steed. He had also eliminated the fearsome two-headed giant Lod, which was rather a shame in a way; one of the heads hadn't been a bad sort of chap at all. Lafayette had gone on to depose the usurper, Goruble, and restore the throne to Princess Adoranne. Ever since, he—and his charming former chambermaid, Daphne—had been honored citizens of the quaint kingdom of Artesia, occupying a spacious apartment in the West Palace Annex, and on the closest terms with Adoranne and Prince Alain, her consort.

And now, here he was, back out in the cold, dark street, again approaching the door that had led him to such adventures, so long ago.

But there'd be no adventures this time, he told himself sternly. He had learned his lesson the last time he had found himself feeling impatient with the peaceful life. His meddling had gotten him involved on a mad assignment from Central—the head office of the Inter-dimensional Monitor Service—which had almost left him stranded in a deserted parallel world. No, this time he would know better. He had just come as a lark, actually. In a way it was rather jolly shivering in the cold, remembering his early days as a penniless draftsman, holed up in Mrs. McGlint's Clean Rooms and Board, subsisting on sardines and

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daydreams—but only because he had a cosy bed waiting for him back in the palace. Wouldn't it be ghastly, he thought, to *really* be some homeless gypsy, out on the tiles at this hour, chilled to the bone and hungry, with no relief in sight?

"That's enough gloomy thinking," he told himself firmly as he reached the tavern door. "In an hour I'll be snuggled up with Daphne, all the better for a brisk stroll in the night air." He adjusted a look of amused complacency on his face, shook out his cloak, and stepped into the warmth and beery aroma of the Axe and Dragon.

2

A BED OF COALS glowing in the ox-sized fireplace dimly illuminated the long, low room, the plank tables ranked along one side, the wine and ale kegs along the other. But for the silent bartender behind the trestle-bar, the place seemed deserted, until a large figure rose among the shadows at the rear.

"Over dis way, bub!" a hearty voice growled. "Take a load off duh dogs, an we'll hoist a few in membry o' duh old days!"

"Red Bull!" Lafayette exclaimed, ducking his head under the low, age-blackened beams. "I thought it would be you!" He clasped the callused hand of the big man who beamed at him, his little red-rimmed eyes agleam in his lumped, scarred face. There was a little gray now, Lafayette noticed, in the bristly red thatch above the cauliflowered ears. Otherwise the soft life hadn't changed the former outlaw.

"Where've you been keeping yourself?" Lafayette demanded as he took the proferred chair. "I haven't seen you in a year or more."

"Take a tip from a pal," the Red Bull said sadly as he poured wine into O'Leary's glass. "Stay away from dem hick jails."

"You haven't been up to your old tricks?" Lafayette demanded in a severe tone. "I thought you'd reformed, Red Bull."

"Naw—dey nabs me on account of I was astride a nag which it had some udder mug's brand on. But, geeze, youse know how all dese bay mares look alike on duh parking lot."

"I warned you about your casual view of property rights," Lafayette said. "The first night we met—right here at this very table."

"Yeah—I picked duh spot fer duh sentimental associations," the big man acknowledged. He sighed. "Youse had duh right idear, chum: youse give up duh cutpurse racket and went straight, and now—"

"Are you back on that old idea?" Lafayette said sharply. "I was never a cutpurse. I don't know how you got that impression—"

"Dat's right, pal, don't admit nothing." The Red Bull winked, a grotesque twisting of battered features. "It'll be our little secret dat youse used to be duh Phantom Highwayman, duh dread spectre o' duh moors."

"That's a lot of rubbish, Red Bull," Lafayette said, sampling his wine. "Just because the first time you saw me I was wearing a coat of claret velvet and breeches of brown doe-skin—"

"Yeah, and dey fitted wit' never a wrinkle, right? An' dey come up to your thigh. An' yuh had a French cocked hat on your forhead, and a bunch of lace at your chin—"

"That doesn't mean a thing! It just happened to be what I conjured up—I

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mean," he corrected, seeing that he was about to complicate matters: the Red Bull would never understand the Focussing of the Psychical Energies. "I mean, I actually intended to wear a gray suit and a Homburg, but something went a little awry, and—"

"Sure, sure, I heard all dat sweet jazz before, pal. Anyways, I seen by duh papers dis would be a night when duh moon would be like a ghostly galleon, and duh wind would be a torrent o' darkness, an' all, so I sez—"

"Will you come to the point?" Lafayette snapped. "It's actually long after my bedtime, and—"

"Sure chum. Drink your wine whilst I fill youse in. It's like dis, see? I'm ankling along duh pike, on my way back from duh burg where dey hung duh frame on me, an' I'm overtook by nightfall. So I seeks shelter in a cave an' in duh morning what was my surprise to find duh rock I was using fer a piller was ackshully a neat little cask like, you know, a safety deposit box."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. So, I'm shaking it around a little, and duh lids falls open. And guess what's inside?"

"Money? Jewels?" Lafayette hazarded, swallowing more wine. It was poor stuff, thin and sour. Too bad Central was keeping that Suppressor focussed on him; otherwise they could have just as easily been drinking Chateau Lafitte-Rothschilde . . .

"Naw," the Red Bull said disgustedly. "Dere was just some kind o' gadget, like a combination can-opener and hot-patch kit. Only it looks like it's broke. I'm about to t'row it away, when I notice duh lettering on duh bottom."

"What did it say?" Lafayette inquired, yawning. "Made in Japan'?"

"Take a look fer yourself, pal." The Red Bull dipped a set of scarred knuckles inside his grimy leather jerkin, withdrew a small apparatus of the approximate appearance of a six-inch high patent coffee-maker—or possibly a miniature juke-box, Lafayette corrected himself. There was a round base, painted a dark red, surmounted by a clear plastic box inside which were visible a maze of wires, wheels, levers, gears, tiny bits of colored glass and plastic.

"What in the world is it?" he inquired. "Why, those look like condensers and transistors—but that's silly. No one's invented transistors yet, in Artesia."

"Great, chum!" the Red Bull exclaimed. "I knowed youse would have duh straight dope!"

"I don't have any dope, straight or otherwise," O'Leary objected. "I haven't the faintest idea what the thing is." He turned it around, frowning at it. "What does it do, Red Bull?"

"Huh? Beats me, Bub. But what I figger is, it's gotta do *some*thing nifty—and all we got to do is dope out what, and we're in business!"

"Nonsense," Lafayette pushed the apparatus away. "Red Bull, it was nice seeing you again, but I'm afraid you're wasting my time with this Rube Goldberg. Are you sure you didn't cobble it up yourself? I never saw mechanical and electronic components jumbled together like that—"

"Whom, I?" the Red Bull said indignantly. "Pal, I wouldn't string youse! Like I says, I find duh gimcrack in duh cave, an—"

"Fooey, Red Bull." Lafayette finished his wine and pushed the mug back. "I'm going home and to bed, where I belong. Drop around some evening and we'll talk over the good old days when I was a poor,

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homeless boob, with no friends, no money, and a death sentence hanging over me."

"Hey, wait, pal! You ain't seen what's wrote on duh bottom, which I din't t'row it away when I seen it!"

Lafayette grunted impatiently, picked up the gadget and peered at the underside of the base. He frowned, held it in a better light.

"Well," he exclaimed. "Why didn't you say so? This could be something important. Where did you say you found it?"

"Buried in duh cave. And as soon as I seen duh royal coat of arms, I glommed I was onto something big, right, pal?"

"Goruble's personal cartouche," Lafayette muttered. "But it looks as if it were stamped in the metal with a hand-punch. There's something else . . ."

"What does it say, chum?" The Red Bull leaned forward eagerly.

"Haven't you read it?" Lafayette inquired in surprise.

"Uh—I din't go in much fer duh scholar bit when I was a nipper," the big man said abashedly.

"It's difficult to read in this light—but I can make out . . . PROPERTY OF CENTRAL PROBABILITY LABORATORY." He rubbed a finger at the tarnished surface; more letters appeared:

FOCAL REFERENT—VARIABLE (FULL RANGE) MARK III

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"Chee," the Red Bull said reverently.

"Why, good lord," Lafayette said, "I'll bet this is part of the loot Goruble brought along to Artesia when he defected from the Central Monitor Service, twenty-five years ago! I remember that Nicodaeus said they'd recovered a Traveler-load of stuff from the lab he'd rigged up in the palace catacombs, but that the records seemed to indicate there was more that they couldn't find—" He broke off. "Red Bull—that cave—could you find it again? There might be a whole trove of other items there!"

"Dat's what I been tryna tell youse, pal," the former second-story man said aggrievedly. "Oncet I seen I was onto duh real goods, I dig around and come up wit' a whole bunch o' wild-looking gear under duh floor! I can't carry all duh stuff, so I bury it again, and come hot-footing to youse wit' duh whole story."

"Ye gods, Red Bull—this stuff is dynamite! If it fell into the wrong hands—"

"Right, Bub! Dat's why I think of youse! Now, duh way I got duh caper doped, I bring in duh stuff a couple choice items at a time, see, and wit' your old contacts from when youse was in duh game, we could soon retire on duh take!"

"Take! Are you out of your mind? This stuff is experimental equipment from a temporal laboratory—where they run experiments in probability, time travel, inter-dimensional relationships! Start messing with this, and heaven only knows what kind of probability stresses you'd set up! You might shift half of Artesia into some other phase of existence—or even worse!"

The Red Bull was frowning darkly. "What's duh proposition got to do wit' time-tables? And you can skip duh cracks about my relationships. I been keeping company wit' duh same frail for five years now, and all we ever do—"

"You don't understand, Red Bull! We can't sell this stuff! It belongs to Central! Goruble stole it! We have to get it back to

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them at once, before something terrible happens!"

"Listen, pal," the Red Bull said earnestly. "Duh worst t'ing I can see happening is fer some udder slob to latch onto duh gravy, see?"

"Red Bull, try to fix this thought in your mind," Lafayette said tautly. "This thing is potentially more dangerous than an atom bomb—not that you know what an atom bomb is. Just take my word for it that I have to turn it over to the Central authorities at once—if I can get hold of the Central authorities," he added doubtfully.

"Nix, pal," the Red Bull's immense hand closed around the device resting on the scarred table. "Turn duh goods over to duh bulls, and dey pocket duh spoils fer demselfs. Nuts to dat. If youse don't want a slice o' duh action, I'll work duh play solo!"

"No, Red Bull, you still don't get it! Listen—I promise you there'll be a fat reward for turning this in. Say—a hundred gold pieces."

"What about duh rest o' duh trove?" the Red Bull inquired suspiciously, rubbing a callused hand across his stubbled chin with a sound like frying fat.

"We can't touch it. I'll use the special phone in Nicodaeus' old lab to put a call through to Central, and get an Inspector of Continua in here to take charge—"

"Youse was saying about duh reward. What say to ten grand, cash on duh line?"

"I'm sure it can be arranged. What about it, Red Bull? I'll see that your interests are protected."

"Well—it ain't like duh old days, Bub. I still think youse and me would of been a great team, wit' my brains and your neat tricks, like riding t'rough duh sky and turning to smoke under duh very noses o' duh Johns—"

"You're talking nonsense, Red Bull. Just trust me: I'll see to it you don't lose by it. Now tell me—where is this cave, exactly?"

"Well . . . I dunno, pal," the Red Bull said doubtfully. "Youse are a square mug, an all, but dis is duh biggest career opportunity dat ever come my way." He rose. "I got to go to duh can," he confided. "Gimme a minute to consider duh angles." He swaggered off toward the rear of the tavern. Lafayette picked up the Focal Referent, Mark III, and stared into the complexities of its interior. It resembled no machine he had ever seen before; it was as though the components of an eight-day clock and a portable TV had been mixed thoroughly and packed into the same restricted space. There was a small, flat button on one side, near the bottom, glowing with a faint, enticing glow. Lafayette poked at it . . .

The Universe turned inside out. Lafayette—clinging to the interior of the vast solid that surrounded the hollow bubble that was the earth—was dimly aware that his body now filled a void of infinite extent, while his eyes, situated at the exact center of reality, stared directly into each other, probing a bottomless nothingness that whirled, expanded, and—

The walls of the room were sailing past, like a merry-go-round running down. Lafayette blinked dizzily, grabbed for his wine glass, took a hearty gulp, sat trembling and drawing deep, restorative breaths. He swallowed a lump the approximate size of a hard-boiled egg, edging as far as possible away from the innocent-looking apparatus sitting on the table before him.

"Oh, you're a genius, O'Leary," he muttered to himself, patting his pockets for a handkerchief with which to mop the

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cold sweat from his brow. "You give the Red Bull a lecture on the danger of meddling with experimental temporal lab equipment, and then you poke a button yourself, and nearly . . . nearly. . . do whatever I nearly did!"

There was a sudden sound of scuffling, emanating from the direction of the alley behind the tavern. The tapman came around the bar with a stout cudgel in his hand. He halted abruptly, staring at Lafayette.

"We're closed, you," he said roughly. "How'd ye get in here, anyway?"

"Through the door, Tom, as usual," Lafayette snapped. "What about it?"

"Haul ye'r freight, ye scurvy knave," the barman hooked a thick thumb over his shoulder. "Out!"

"What's got into you, Tom?" O'Leary said testily. "Go polish a glass or something—"

"Look, crum-bum—so I open the joint so me old mate the Red Bull could have a quiet rondy-vooz with a nobleman; that don't mean every varlet on the pavement gets to warm hisself at me fire—"

"Some fire," Lafayette snapped. "The A & D used to be a fairly nice dive, as dives go—but I can see it's deteriorated—" He broke off with an *oof!* as Tom rammed the club into his short ribs, grasped him by the back of the neck, and assisted him from the bench.

"I says out, rogue, and out is what I mean!"

As the landlord sent him staggering toward the door, Lafayette caught at one of the posts supporting the sagging beams, whirled around it, and drove a straight right punch to the barman's chin, sending him bounding backward to end up on the packed-earth floor with his head under a table.

"I was just leaving, thanks," Lafayette said, noting as he seized the Mark III from the table that his voice had developed a hoarse, croaking sound. But no wonder, after the scare he'd had, followed by the unexpected attack by an old acquaintance. "I think you'd better lay off sampling the stock, Tom. It does nothing for your personality." He paused at the door to straighten his coat, smooth his lapels. The cloth felt unaccountably greasy. He looked down, stared aghast at grimy breeches, torn stockings, and run-over shoes.

"All that from one little scuffle?" he wondered aloud. The landlord was crawling painfully forth from under the table.

"Stick around, mister," he said blurrily. "It's two falls out o' three, remember?" As he came to his feet with a lurch, Lafayette slipped out into the dark street. A chill drizzle of rain had started up, driven by the gusty wind. The Red Bull was nowhere in sight.

"Now, where's he gotten to?" Lafayette wondered aloud as he reached to draw his cloak about him, only to discover that the warm garment was gone.

"Drat!" he said, turning back to the tavern door.

"Tom! I forgot something!" he shouted; but even as he spoke, the light faded inside. He rattled and pounded in vain. The oak panel was locked tight.

"Oh, perfect," he groaned aloud. "Now he's mad at me—and it was my second-best cloak, too, the one Daphne's Aunt Lardie made for me." He turned up his jacket collar—of stiff, coarse wool, he noted absently; funny; he'd grabbed a coat from the closet in the dark, but he didn't remember owning anything *this* disreputable. Maybe it belonged to the man who had come to clear the swallows nests out of the chimney . . .

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"But never mind that," he reminded himself firmly. "Getting this infernal machine into safe hands is the important thing. I'll lock it in the palace vault, and then try to get in touch with Central, and . . ." His train of thought was interrupted by the clank of heavy boots on the pavement of an alley which debouched from between narrow buildings a few yards ahead. O'Leary shied, reaching instinctively for his sword-hilt—

But of course he wasn't wearing a sword, he realized as his fingers closed on nothing. Hadn't worn one in years, except on gala occasions, and then just a light, bejeweled model that was strictly for show. But then, he hadn't been out in the midnight streets alone for quite awhile. And it had never occurred to him tonight to do anything as melodramatic as buckling on the worn blade he'd used in the old days . . .

As he hastily tucked the Mark III away out of sight, three men emerged from the alleymouth, all in floppy feathered hats, green and yellow striped jackets—Adoranne's colors—wide scarlet sashes, baggy pants above carelessly rolled boots: The Royal City Guard.

"Oh, boy, am I glad to see you fellows," Lafayette greeted the trio. "I thought you were footpads or worse. Look, I need an escort back to the palace, and—"

"Stay, rogue!" the leading musketeer barked. "Up against the wall!"

"Turn around and put your hands against it, over your head, you know the routine!" a second guardsman commanded, hand on epee hilt.

"This is no time for jokes," O'Leary announced in some asperity. "I've got some hot cargo for the royal vault—high priority stuff. Shorty—" He addressed the smallest of the trio, a plump sergeant with fiercely curled mustachios, "you lead the way, and you other two chaps fall in behind—"

"Don't go calling me by my nickname!" the short cop roared, whipping out his blade. "And we ain't no chaps!"

"What's got into you, Shorty?" Lafayette demanded in astonishment. "You're not mad just because I won two-fifty from you playing at skittles the other night—"

The sword leaped to prick his throat. "Jest you button the lip, Clyde, 'fore I pin you to the wall!" Shorty motioned curtly. "You boys frisk him. I got a funny feeling this bozo's here's more'n a routine vagrant."

"Are you all out of your minds?" O'Leary yelled as the guardsmen flung him roughly against the wall, began patting his pockets none too gently. "Shorty, do you really mean you don't recognize me?"

"Hey—hold it, boys," Shorty said. "Uh—turn around, you," he addressed Lafayette in an more uncertain tone. "You claim I know you, hah?" He frowned at him searchingly. "Well, maybe you went downhill since I seen you last . . . but I wouldn't want to turn my back on an old pal. What was the name again?"

"O'Leary!" Lafayette yelled. "Lafayette O'Leary. *Sir* Lafayette O'Leary, if you want to get technical!"

"OK," Shorty rasped with a return to his gravelly voice. "You picked the wrong pigeon, stoop! It just so happens that me and Sir Lafayette are just like that!" He held up two fingers, close together, to indicate the intimacy of the relationship. "Why, on his first night in town, five years ago, Sir Lafayette done me a favor which I'll never forget it—me and Gertrude neither!"

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"Right!" Lafayette cried. "That was just before I went all wivery and almost disappeared back to Mrs. McGlint's—and as a favor to you boys, I stuck around, just so you wouldn't have anything inexplicable to explain to the desk sergeant, right?"

"Hey," one of the troopers said. "Lookit what I found, Sarge!" He held up a fat gold watch, shaped like a yellow turnip.

"W-where did that come from?" Lafayette faltered.

"And how about this?" A second man produced a jeweled pendant from O'Leary's other pocket. "And this!" He displayed a silver inlaid Elk's tooth, an ornate snuff-box with a diamond studded crest, a fistful of lesser baubles. "Looks like your old pal has been working, Sarge!"

"I've been framed!" Lafayette cried. "Somebody planted that stuff on me!"

"That cuts it," the NCO snarled. "Try to make a monkey out o' me, will you? You'll be on magotty bread and green water for thirty days before your trial even comes up, wittold!"

"Let's just go back to the palace," Lafayette shouted. "We'll ask Daphne—Countess Daphne, to you, you moron—she'll confirm what I say! And after this is straightened out—"

"Put the cuffs on him, Fred," Shorty said. "Hubba hubba. We go off duty in ten minutes."

"Oh, no," Lafayette said, half to himself. "This isn't going to turn into one of those idiotic farces where everything goes from bad to worse just because no one has sense enough to explain matters. All I have to do is just speak calmly and firmly to these perfectly reasonable officers of the law, and—"

From the nearby alley there was a sudden rasp of shoe-leather on cobbles. Shorty whirled, grabbing for his sword-hilt as dark figures loomed. There was a dull *thunk!* as of a ball-bat striking a saddle; the stubby sergeant's feathered hat fell off, as its owner stumbled backward and went down. Even as their blades cleared their scabbards, the other two musketeers received matching blows to the skull. They collapsed in a flutter of plumes, a flapping of silk, a clatter of steel. Three tall, dark men in the jeweled leathers and gaudy silks of a Wayfarers Tribe closed in about Lafayette.

"Let's get going, Zorro," one of them whispered in a voice that was obviously the product of damaged vocal chords, substantiating the testimony of the welted scar across his brown throat, only partially concealed by a greasy scarf knotted there. A second member of the band—a one-eyed villian with a massive gold earring—was swiftly going through the pockets of the felled policemen.

"Hey—wait just a minute," O'Leary blurted, in confusion. "What's going on here? Who are you? Why did you slug the cops? What—"

"Losing your greep, Zorro?" the leader cut him off brusquely. "You could have knocked me over weeth a feender wheen I see you in the clutches of the *Roumi* dogs." He stooped, with a quick slash of a foot-long knife freed a dagger in an ornately worked sheath from the belt of the nearest musketeer. "Queek, compadres," he rasped. "Someone's coming theese way." He caught O'Leary's arm, began hauling him toward the alley-mouth from which the raiders had pounced.

"Hold on, fellows!" Lafayette protested. "Look, I appreciate the gesture and all that, but it isn't necessary. I'll just turn myself in and make a clean breast of

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it, explain that it was all a general misunderstanding, and—"

"Poor Zorro, a blow on the head has meexed up his weets, Luppo," a short, swarthy man with a full beard grunted.

"Don't you understand?" Lafayette yelped sharply as he was hustled along the alley. "I *want* to go to court! You're just making it worse! And stop calling me Zorro! My name's O'Leary!"

The leader of the band swung Lafayette around to glare down into his face from a height of close to seven feet of leather, bone and muscle. "Worse? What does theese mean, Zorro? That you deedn't come through on your beeg brag, eh?" He gave O'Leary a bone-rattling shake. "And so you theenk instead of facing up to King Shosto, you'll do a leetle time in the *Roumi* breeg, ees that eet?"

"No, you big ape!" Lafayette yelled, and landed a solid kick to the bulky Wayfarer's shin. As the victim yelled and bent to massage the injury, Lafayette jerked free, whirled—and was facing half a dozen Bowie knives gripped in as many large, brown fists.

"Look, fellows, let's talk it over," Lafayette started. At that moment, there was a yell from the street where they had left the three musketeers. Lafayette opened his mouth to respond, caught only a glimpse of a cloak as it whirled at his head; then he was muffled in its sour-smelling folds, lifted from his feet, slung over a bony shoulder, and carried, jolting, from the scene.

CHAPTER TWO

BUNDLED in the reeking cloak and trussed with ropes, Lafayette lay in what he deduced to be the bed of a wagon, judging from the sounds and odors of horse, the rumble of unshod wheels on cobbles, and the creak of harness. His attempts to shout for air had netted him painful blows, after which he had subsided and concentrated his efforts on avoiding suffocation. Now he lay quietly, his bruises throbbing with every jolt of the cumbersome vehicle.

At length the sound of cobbles gave way to the softer texture of an unpaved surface. Leather groaned as the wagon bed took on a tilt that testified to the ascent of a grade. The air grew cooler. At last, with a final lurch, all motion ceased. Lafayette struggled to sit up, was promptly seized and pitched over the side where waiting hands caught him, amid a guttural exchange of a questions and answers in a stacatto dialect. The ropes were stripped away, then the muffling cloak. Lafayette sneezed, spat dust from his mouth, dug grit from his eyes and ears, and took a hearty breath of cool, resin-scented air.

He was standing in a clearing in the forest. Bright moonlight dazzled down through the high boughs of lofty pines on patched tents and high-wheeled wagons with once-garish paint jobs now faded to chipped and peeling pastel tones. A motley crowd of black-haired, olive-skinned men, women, and children, all dressed in soiled garments of bright, mismatched colors, stared solemnly at him. From tent flaps and the dim-lit windows of wagons more curious faces gazed. Except for the soft sigh of wind through the trees and the clop of a sway-backed horse shifting his hooves, the silence was total.

"Well," Lafayette began, but a spasm of coughing detracted from the tone of indignation. "I suppose (cough) you've

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kidnapped me (cough-cough) for a reason . . ."

"Steeck around, Zorro. Don't get impatient," the one-eyed man said. "You'll geet the message queeck enough."

There was a stir in the ranks; the crowd parted.

An elderly man, still powerful-looking in spite of his grizzled hair and weather-beaten face, came forward. He was dressed in a purple satin shirt with pink armbands, baggy chartreuse pants above short red boots with curled toes. There were rings on each of his thick fingers; a string of beads hung around his corded neck. Through his wide green alligator belt were thrust a bulky pistol and a big-bladed knife with glass emeralds and rubies set in the plastic handle. He planted himself before Lafayette, looked him up and down with an expression of sour disapproval on his not-recently shaved mahogany-dark face.

"Ha!" he said. "So Meester Beeg-mouth Zorro, he not so hot like he theenk, hey?" He grasped a long hair curling from his nose, yanked it out, held it up, looked at it, let his narrowed eyes slide past it to Lafayette.

"Look, I don't know what this Zorro business is," O'Leary said, "but if you're in charge of this menagerie, how about detailing someone to take me back to town before matters get entirely out of hand? I can square things by saying a word to a chap in the records department and have the whole thing scratched off the blotter, and—"

"Ha!" the oldster cut Lafayette's speech short. "You theenk you weegle out of the seetuation by preteending you got bats een the belfry! But eet's no use, Zorro! Theese is not the way the ancient Law of the Tribe, she works!"

A mutter of agreement rose from the bystanders. There were a few snickers; a single muffled sob came from a dark-eyed young creature in the front rank.

"Whats your tribal law got to do with me?" Lafayette said hotly. "I was going quietly about my business when your gang of thugs grabbed me—"

"OK, I streeng along weeth the gag," the fierce-eyed old man interrupted with an ominous grin. "Last night, you dreenk a few bottles of Old Sulphuric, and you geet beeg ideas: you have the nerve to make a pass at the niece of the King! By the rule of the Tribe, theese offer, she cannot be ignored—even from a seemple-minded nobody like you! So—poor old King Shosto—he geeves you your chance!" The swarthy man smote himself on the chest.

"Look, you've got me mixed up with somebody else," Lafayette said. "My name is O'Leary, and—"

"But naturally, before you can have the preevilege of wooing Gizelle, you got to breeng home a trophy to qualify. For theese reason, you sleep eento the ceety under cover of darkness. I seend Luppo and a few of the boys along to keep an eye on you. And—the first theeng—the *Roumi* cops peek you up. Beeg deal! Ha!"

"This seems to be a case of mistaken identity," Lafayette said reasonably. "I've never seen you before in my life. My name is O'Leary, and I live in the palace with my wife, Countess Daphne, and I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh?" the old chieftain said with a sly smile. "O'Leary, eh? You got any ideentification?"

"Certainly," Lafayette said promptly, patting his pockets. "I have any number of . . documents . . . only . . ." With a sinking feeling, he surveyed the soiled red bandanna his hip pocket had produced. "Only I seem to have left my

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wallet in my other suit."

"Oh, too bad." King Shosto wagged his head, grinning at his lieutenants. "He left eet een hees other suit." His smile disappeared. "Well, let's see what you've got een *theese* suit to show for a night's work! Show us the trophy that proves your skeel weeth your feengers!"

With all eyes on him, Lafayette rummaged dubiously, came up with a crumpled packet of poisonous-looking black cigarets, an imitation pearl-handled pen knife, a worn set of brass knuckles, a second soiled handkerchief of a virulent shade of green, and a gnawed ivory toothpick.

"I, er, seem to have gotten hold of someone else's coat," he ad libbed.

"And somebody else's pants," King Shosto grated. "And that somebody ees Zorro!" Suddenly the giant knife was in the old man's hand, being brandished under O'Leary's nose. "Now I cut your heart out!" he roared. "Only eet would be too queek!"

"Just a minute!" Lafayette back-pedalled, was grabbed and held in a rigid grip by eager volunteers.

"The peenalty for failure to breeng home the bacon ees the Death of the Thousand Hooks!" Shosto announced loudly. "I decree a night of loafing and dreenking to get eento the mood, so we do the job right!"

"Zorro! What about your treeck pockets?" a tearful feminine voice cried. The girl who had been showing signs of distress ever since Lafayette's arrival rushed forward and seized his arm as if to tug him from the grip of the men. "Show them, Zorito! Show them you are as beeg a thief as any of them!"

"Gizelle, go bake a pizza!" the old man roared. "Theese is none of your beezness! Theese cowardly peeg, he dies!"

"Ett ees too!" she wailed defiantly. "Theese ees the cowardly peeg I love!"

"Zut, alors!" Shosto yelled. "You . . . and theese four-flusher! Theese viper een my bosom! Theese upstart! Never weel he have you!"

"Zorito!" she wailed. "Don't you remember how I steetched all those secret pockets for you, and how you were going to feel theem weeth goodies? Don't you have one leetle souvenir of your treep to show theem?"

"Secret pockets?" Shosto rumbled. "What's theese nonsense?"

"Een his sleeves!" Gizelle seized Lafayette's cuff, turned it back, explored with her brown fingers. With a yelp of delight she drew forth a slim, silvery watch dangling from a glittering chain.

"You see? Zorito, my hero!" As she flung her arms around Lafayette's neck, Shosto grabbed the watch, stared at it.

"Hey!" the man called Luppo blurted. "You can stuff me for an owl eef that eesn't the solid platinum watch of the Lord Mayor of Artesia Ceety!"

"Where deed you get theese?" Shosto demanded.

"Why, I, ah . . ." Lafayette faltered.

"He stole eet, you brute," Gizelle cried. "What do you theenk, he bought eet een a pawnshop?"

"Well, Shosto, eet looks like Zorro fooled you theese time," someone spoke up.

"He not only leefted the Lord Mayor's watch—but what an actor!" another said admiringly. "I would have sworn he deedn't have the proverbial weendow to throw eet out of—and all the while he had the beegest heist of the decade stashed een hees coat-lining!"

"Come on, Shosto—be a sport!" another challenged. "Admeet he has made the team!"

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"Well—maybe I geev heem another chance." Shosto dealt himself a blow on the chest that would have staggered a lesser man, grinned a sudden, flashing grin. "Teen thousand thundering devils on a teen roof!" he roared. "Theese ees an occasion for celebration! We proceed weeth the loafing and dreenking as planned! Too bad we have to do weethout the diversion of the Death of the Thousand Hooks," he added, with a regretful glance at Lafayette. "But I can always reschedule eet, eef he doesn't treat my leetle Gizelle right!" He gestured grandly and the men holding Lafayette released him.

The Wayfarers gathered around him, slapping him on the back and pumping his hand. Someone struck up a tune on a concertina; others joined in. Jugs appeared, to be passed from hand to hand. As soon as he could, Lafayette disengaged himself, used the green handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Thanks very much," he said to Gizelle. "I, uh, appreciate your speaking up for me, Miss."

She hugged his arm, looked up at him with a flashing smile. Her eyes were immense, glistening dark, her nose delightfully *retrousse*, her lips sweetly curved, her cheeks dimpled.

"Theenk nothing of it, Zorito. After all, I couldn't let theem cut you in beets, could I?"

"I'm glad somebody around here feels that way. But I still have the problem of getting home. Could I arrange to borrow a horse—just overnight, of course—"

A burst of laughter from the gallery greeted this request. Gizelle compressed her lips, took Lafayette's arm possessively.

"You are a beeg joker, Zorito," she said sternly; then she smiled. "But eet ees no matter; I love you anyway! Now—on weeth the festeevities!" She seized his hand and whirled him away toward the sound of music.

2

IT WAS three hours later. The twenty-gallon punch-tank contained only half an inch of pulpy dregs; the roast ox had been stripped to the bones. The musicians had long since slid, snoring, under their benches. Only a few determined drinkers still raised raucous voices in old Wayfarer songs. Gizelle had disappeared momentarily on some personal errand. It was now or never.

Lafayette put down the leathern cup he had been nursing, eased silently back into the shadows. No one called after him. He crossed a moonlit strip of grassy meadow, waited again in the shelter of the trees. The drunken song continued undisturbed. He turned and slipped away between the trees.

A hundred feet up the trail, with the sounds and smells of the celebration already lost in the spicy scent of pine and the soughing of wind through the heavy boughs, Lafayette halted, peering back down trail for signs of followers. Seeing no one, he tip-toed off the trail, setting a direct course for the capital—about ten miles due south, he estimated. A long hike, but well worth it to get clear of this bunch of maniacs. Little Gizelle was the only sane person in camp—and even she had some serious hang-ups. Well, he'd send her a nice memento once he was safely back in town; a string of beads say, or possibly a party dress. It would be nice to see her dolled up. He pictured her garbed in formal court wear, with jewels in her hair and her fingernails polished, and just a touch of perfume back of the

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ear.

"I might even invite her down to a rout or ball," he mused. "She'd be a sensation, cleaned up a little; she might even meet some nice young fellow who'd put a ring on her finger, and—"

Ducking under a low-spreading branch, Lafayette halted, frowning at a large pair of boots visible under a bush. His gaze travelled upward, along a matching pair of legs, surmounted by the torso and unfriendly features of Luppo, standing fists on hips, smiling crookedly down at him.

"Looking for sometheeng, Zorro?" the big man growled in his husky voice.

"I was just taking a little constitutional," Lafayette said, getting to his feet with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Eef I was the suspeecious type," Luppo growled, "I might theenk you were trying to sneak out on my seester like a feelthy double-crossing rat."

With a muttered "Hmphff," Lafayette turned and made his way back down the path, followed by the big tribesman's sardonic chuckle. Judging that he had put sufficient distance between himself and Luppo, he picked a spot where the undergrowth thinned, again left the path, striking off to the left. A dense stand of brambles barred his path; he angled uphill to avoid it, crawled under a clump of thorn; scaled an outcropping of rock, turned to take his bearings, and saw a large man named Borako leaning against a tree, casually whittling a stick. The Wayfarer looked up, spat,

"Another shortcut?" he enquired with a sly smile.

"Actually," Lafayette said haughtily, "I thought I spotted a rare variety of coot over this way."

"Not a coot," Borako said. "A wild goose, I theenk."

"Well, I can't stand here nattering," Lafayette said loftily. "Gizelle will be wondering where I am."

He made his way back down into camp, Borako's boots clumping behind him. Gizelle met him as he reached the clearing.

"Zorito! Come! Eet's time to get ready for the wedding."

"Oh, is someone getting married?" Lafayette said. "Well, I'm sure it will be a jolly occasion, and I appreciate the invitation, but—" His remonstrances were cut short as Gizelle threw her arms around his neck.

"Uh—Gizelle," he started, "there's something I should tell you—"

"Zorito! Stop talking! How can I keess you?"

"Are you sure you know me well enough?" He temporized as she clung to him.

"Eet ees an old tribal custom," she murmurred, nibbling his ear, "to sneak a leetle sample of the goods before buying . . ."

"Buying?" Lafayette stalled. "You mean stealing, don't you?"

Gizelle giggled. "Sure—you get the idea. Come on." She caught his hand and pulled him toward her wagon. As they approached it, a large man stepped forth from the shadows.

"Well—what do you want, you beeg bum?" Gizelle said spiritedly, with a toss of her head.

"The Ancient Law don't say notheeng about geeving the veectim a beeg smooch before the wedding," the man said sullenly.

"So—what's eet to you, Borako?"

"You know I got the hots for you, Gizelle!"

"Get lost, you," Lafayette spoke up.

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"Can't you see you're disturbing the lady?"

"You want to come out een the alley and say that?" Borako demanded, stepping forward truculently.

"No!" Gizelle cried, hurling herself at him; he knocked her roughly aside.

"Here!" Lafayette exclaimed. "You can't do that!"

"Let's see you stop me!" Borako yanked the bread knife from his belt, advanced on Lafayette in a crouch. As he slashed out with the blade, Lafayette leaned aside, clamped a complicated two-handed grip on the man's wrist and with a heave, levered him over his hip. Borako executed a flip and landed heavily on his jaw and lay still, while the knife went skittering across the grass.

"Zorito! My hero!" Gizelle squealed, throwing her arms around Lafayette's neck. "For a meenute there I theenk eet ees all over! But you protected me, at the reesk of your life! You *do* love me, my hero!"

"You did the same for me," Lafayette mumbled, his vocal apparatus somewhat encumbered by the kisses of the grateful girl. "That was queek theenking—I mean, quick thinking—"

"Aha—you sleeped! You forgot your phoney accent!" Gizelle hugged him tighter. "Frankly, I was begeening to wonder a leetle . . ."

"Look here," Lafayette said, holding her at arm's length. "Look at me! Do I really look like this Zorro character?"

"Zorito, you are a beeg comeec!" Gizelle grabbed his ears, nibbled his cheek. "Of course you look like yourself, seely! Why shouldn't you?"

"Because I'm *not* myself! I mean, I'm not anyone named Zorito! I'm Lafayette O'Leary! I'm a peaceful *Roumi,* who just happened to be skulking around in the dark and got picked up by the City Guard, and rescued by mistake by Luppo and his thugs! And now everybody seems to think I'm somebody I'm not!"

Gizelle looked at him doubtfully. "Nobody could look theese much like my Zorito and not be Zorito . . . unless you got maybe a tween brother?"

"No, I'm not twins," Lafayette said firmly. "At least," he started, "not unless you want to count certain characters like Lorenzo and Lothario O'Leary, and of course Lohengrin O'Leary, and Lafcadio and Lancelot—" he caught himself. "But I'm just obfuscating the issue. They don't really exist—at least not in this continuum."

"You sure talk a bunch of nonseense, Zorito," Gizelle said. "Hey—I know! Take off your clothes!"

"Er—do you think we have time?" Lafayette hedged. "I mean—"

"You got a leetle birth-mark on your heep," Gizelle explained. "Let me see, queek!"

"Just a minute, somebody might come along and get the wrong idea!" Lafayette protested; but the girl had already grabbed his shirt, yanked the tails clear of his belt, dragged his waist-band down to expose his hip-bone.

"See? Just like I remeember!" she pointed in triumph to the butterfly shaped blemish on the olive skin. "I knew you were keeding all along, Zorito!"

"That's impossible," Lafayette said, staring at the mark. He poked at it experimentally. "I never had a birthmark in my life! I . . ." his voice faltered as his gaze focussed on his fingertip. It was a long, slender finger, with a grimy, well-chewed nail.

"That," O'Leary said, swallowing hard, "is not my finger!"

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3

"I'M PERFECTLY FINE," Lafayette said calmly, addressing the backs of his eyelids. "Pulse sixty, blood pressure normal, temperature 98.6°F., sensory impressions coming in loud and clear, memory excellent—"

"Zorito," Gizelle said, "why are you standeeng there weeth your eyes closed, talking to yourself?"

"I'm not talking to myself, my dear. I'm talking to whoever I've turned into—*whom*ever, I should say—object of the preposition, you know—"

"Zorito—you don't turn into eenybody—you are steel you!"

"I can see we're going to have a little trouble with definitions," Lafayette said, feeling the fine edge of hysteria creeping higher, ready to leap. With an effort, he pulled himself together.

"But as I tried to tell your uncle, I have important business in the capital—"

"More important than your wedding night?"

"*My* wedding night?" Lafayette repeated, dumbfounded.

"Yours—and mine," Gizelle said grimly.

"Wait a minute," Lafayette said, "this has gone far enough. In the first place, I don't even know you, and in the second place I've already got a wife, and—" He leaped back just in time as a slim blade flashed in the girl's hand.

"So—eet's like theese, eh?" she hissed, advancing. "You theenk you can play games weeth the heart of Gizelle? You theenk you can keess and run away, hey? I'll feex you so you never break a poor girl's heart again and worm-in-the-grass!" She leaped, Lafayette bumped against the side of a wagon; the blade came up—

But instead of striking, Gizelle hesitated. Sudden tears spilled from her long-lashed eyes. She let the stiletto fall from her fingers, covered her face with her hands.

"I can't do eet," she sobbed. "Now they weel all speet on me, b-b-but I don't care. I weel keel myself instead . . ." she groped for the knife; Lafayette grabbed her hands.

"No!" he blurted. "Gizelle! Stop! Listen to me! I . . . I—"

"You . . . you do care for me theen?" Gizelle said in a quavering tone, blinking away the tears.

"Of course I care for you! I mean . . ." He paused at the succession of expressions that crossed the girl's piquant face.

"You remeember now how much you love me?" she demanded eagerly.

"No—I mean—I don't remember, but . . ."

"You poor darleeng!" Sudden contrition transformed Gizelle's features into those of an angel of mercy. "Luppo said you got heet on the head! Theese geeves you amnesia, no? That's why you don't remeember our great love!"

"That . . . that must be it," Lafayette temporized.

"My Zorito," Gizelle cooed. "It was for me you got knocked on the head; come, we go eenside; soon eet weel all come back to you." She tugged him toward the wagon door.

"But—what if your uncle sees us—"

"Let heem eat hees heart out," Gizelle said callously.

"Fine—but what if he decides to cut *my* heart out instead?"

"You don't have to play cheecken any longer, Zorito; you made your point. Now you get your reward." She lifted a heavy latch and pushed open the door: a candle

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on a table shed a romantic light on tapestries, icons, rugs, a beaded hanging beyond which was visible a high-sided bed with a red and black satin coverlet and a scattering of pink and green cushions, a tarnished oval mirror. Lafayette stared in fascination at the narrow, swarthy, black-eyed face reflected there. Glossy blue-black hair grew to a widow's peak above high-arched brows. The nose was long and aquiline, the mouth well-moulded if a trifle weak, the teeth china-white except for a gold filling in the upper left incisor. It wasn't a bad-looking face, Lafayette thought numbly, if you liked them flashy and heavy on the hair oil.

Hesitantly, he fingered an ear, poked at his cheek, writhed his lips. The mirrored face aped every action.

"Zorito, why are you weegling your leeps?" Gizelle inquired anxiously. "You aren't goeeing to have a feet, are you?"

"Who knows?" he said, with a hollow laugh, fingering a lean but tough biceps. "I seem to be stuck with someone else's body; it might have anything from aresis to angina pectoris. I suppose I'll find out as soon as the first attack strikes."

"You are a naughty boy, Zorito, not to tell me you are a seek man," Gizelle said reproachfully. "But eet's okay—I'll marry you eenyway. Eet weel be fun while you last." She kissed him warmly. "I won't be a meenute," she breathed as she slid through into the next room with a soft clash of beads.

Dimly through the curtain he saw her toss a garment aside with a deft motion; saw the soft ivory glow of her skin in the colored light.

"Why don't you get comfortable?" she called softly. "And pour us a glass of blackberry wine. Eet's een the cupboard over the Ouija Board."

"I've got to get out of here," Lafayette mumbled, averting his eyes from the alluring vision. "Daphne would never understand the Law of the Tribe." He tiptoed to the door, had his hand on the knob when Gizelle's soft voice spoke behind him:

"Seely—that's not the cupboard. The door beside eet!" He turned; she stood in the doorway, clad in an invisible negligee.

"Oh, of course. My amnesia, you know," he jerked his hand back.

"Amnesia, nothing," she snapped. "You don't theenk I ever let eeny man eento my bedroom before, do you?"

"No offence," Lafayette said quickly, forcing his gaze from her figure to the corner of the room.

Gizelle giggled. "Oh, boy, what a surprise eef you'd stepped out there and run eento Borako. The sight of you would drive heem mad weeth jealousy."

"Maybe I'd better just go out and have a word with him," Lafayette suggested.

"Don't overdo the hero routine, my Zorito. Borako ees steel the tribal champ weeth a knife, even eef you deed accidentally treep heem up. Better geev heem time to cool off . . ." She came to him, slipped her arms around his neck. "Now you better kees me, before *I* cool off, my lover!"

"Ah . . . mmnnn," Lafayette said as their lips met. "I just remembered something I have to do—"

Gizelle made a swift movement; the knife glittered under Lafayette's nose.

"I theenk you remeember the wrong theengs at the wrong time, beeg boy," she said in a tone like torn metal. "Better geet weeth the program!"

"Do you . . . carry that knife all the time?" O'Leary inquired, edging away from it.

"As long as I have one leetle wisp on to

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hide eet een," she said sweetly.

"Oh," Lafayette said. "In that case—I mean, ah, . . ."

"You forgot the wine," Gizelle said. She brushed past him, took out a purple bottle and two long stemmed glasses, poured them full.

"To our wedded bleess," she murmurred, and sipped. "What's the matter, you don't dreenk?" she asked sharply as Lafayette hesitated.

"Uh—to wedded bliss," he said, and drank. "And now, why don't we, ah, repair to the, er, nuptial couch?"

Gizelle giggled.

"I'll just turn off the light," Lafayette said, and quickly snuffed the candle.

"What's the matter, you don't like to look at me?" Gizelle pouted. "You theenk I'm ugly?"

"I'm afraid of a heart attack," Lafayette said. "Can I, ah, help you with your, er, garment?"

"As- you weesh, carissimo," she breathed. Lafayette's fingers brushed satin skin; then he was holding the wispy negligee. Something heavier than sheer silk thumped against his knee: the knife, in a thin leather sheathe.

"Now—take me, my Zorito—I am yours!"

"Uh, I'd better make sure the door's locked," Lafayette said, backing away from the sound of her voice.

"Don't worry about trifles at a time like theese!" she whispered urgently. "Where are you, Zorito?"

"How about the back door?" Lafayette persisted, groping in the dark for the doorknob.

"There ees no back door!"

"I'll just make one last check," Lafayette said as his fingers found the latch. He jerked the door open, slid through into bright moonlight, slammed the door and shot home the bolt. From beyond the panel, Gizelle's voice called his name in a puzzled tone. As Lafayette hastily descended the three steep steps, the bulky figure of Borako separated itself from the shadow of a giant tree fifty feet away.

"Ha!" he growled; in the moonlight his teeth flashed white in a wide and unfriendly grin. "Threw you out, deed she? Eet feegures. And now I feex you, permanently." Borako jerked the knife from his belt, whetted it on a hairy forearm, advancing toward Lafayette.

"Look here, Borako," Lafayette said, edging sideways. "I bounced you on your head once today; am I going to have to do it again?"

"Last time you treecked me," Borako snarled. "Theese time I've got a few freends along to referee." As he spoke, three large men materialized from the deep shadows behind him.

"Well, now that you have a foursome, you can play a few holes of golf," Lafayette snapped. As he spoke, the door of the wagon rattled; a sharp, furious shriek sounded, followed by the pounding of irate feminine fists on the panels.

"Hey—what deed you do to her?" Borako grunted.

"Nothing," Lafayette said. "That's what she's mad about."

As his cohorts rushed to the locked door, Borako uttered a roar and charged. Lafayette feinted, ducked aside and thrust out a foot, hooked Borako's ankle. The Wayfarer plunged head first into a wagon wheel, wedging his head firmly between the big wooden spokes.

The other three men were fully occupied in impeding each other's efforts to unbar the door. Lafayette faded back between wagons, turned, and sprinted for the shelter of the deep forest.

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CHAPTER THREE

FOR HALF AN HOUR, the sounds of men beating the brush waxed and waned around O'Leary where he lay face-down in the concealment of what he had belatedly realized was a patch of berry bramble. At length the activity dwindled, a last voice called a final curse. Silence fell. Lafayette crawled forth, dusted himself off, wincing at the impressive variety of aches and pains he had acquired thus far in the night's adventures. He groped inside his coat; The Mark III was still in place. He scanned the dark slope below. Terraced formations of crumbling rock strata led precariously downward.

He started down, keeping his eyes carefully averted from the vista of black treetops beneath him. It was a stiff twenty-minute climb to a wide ledge where he flopped down to rest.

"Out of condition," he told himself disgustedly. "Lying around the palace with no more exercise than a set of lawn tennis now and then is making an old man of me. When I get back, I'll have to start a regimen of dieting and regular work-outs. I'll jog early in the morning—say ten laps around the gardens while the dew is still on the roses—then a nice light breakfast—no Champagne for a while—then a light work-out on the weights before lunch . . ." He paused, hearing a faint sound in the underbrush. A hunting cat? Or Borako and his men, still on the prowl . . .

Lafayette got to his feet, resumed his cautious descent. The moon went behind a cloud. In pitch darkness, his feet groped for purchase. A rock moved underfoot; he slid, caught at wiry roots, slithered down a sudden steep declivity, fetched up with a painful thump while small stones rattled down around him.

For a moment he lay still, listening for alarums and excursions from above. Except for a high, faint humming as of a trapped insect, the night silence was unbroken.

Lafayette got cautiously to his feet. Inches from the spot where he had fallen, the ledge dropped vertically away; a yard or so on either side of him it curved back in to meet the cliff face.

"Nice going, O'Leary; you've got yourself trapped like a mouse in a wastebasket."

His eyes, accustoming themselves to the darkness, were caught by a faint hint of light emanating from a vertical cleft in the rockface, two feet to the right of the ledge. He leaned out, peered into a narrow, shadowy passage cutting back into the rock, barely visible in the pale glow from an unseen source.

There might be room to squeeze through, he decided. "And maybe there'll be a rear entrance. It's either that, or spend the rest of the night waiting for Borako and Luppo to find me when the sun comes up."

Without further debate, he swung himself out, found a foothold, and squeezed through the narrow opening. A narrow passage led inward ten feet, turned sharply to the right, and debouched into a wide, cool cave bathed in a ghostly blue light.

2

THE ROCK CHAMBER in which Lafayette found himself was high-vaulted, smooth floored, with rough-hewn walls. The eerie glow came from an object resting on a pair of trestles in the center of

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the room—an object that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a coffin. It was seven feet long, a foot deep, tapering toward each end from the three foot breadth of its widest point. A remarkable assemblage of wires and pipes led from the foot of the sarcophagus—if it was a sarcophagus—down to a heavy baseplate where an array of dials glowed a bilious yellow from their own inner illumination.

"Just take it easy," Lafayette soothed himself. "There's nothing spooky about it. It's all perfectly natural. Outside the sun will soon be shining. It just happens to be a cave with a box in it, that's all . . ."

O'Leary circled the coffin—if it *was* a coffin, he reminded himself doggedly, suppressing a tendency for the hairs on the nape of his neck to stand erect. There was nothing else in the chamber; no other passage led from it; there was no sound but the soft hum, like that of a heavy-duty freezer, Lafayette thought.

"A coffin-shaped freezer? Why would anyone want a coffin-shaped freezer?" he inquired aloud in a breezy tone; but the hollow, echoic quality of his words robbed them of the cheeriness he had intended. In silence he approached the box; it was covered by a thick lid, sealed with a strip of sponge rubber. At close range he saw that a layer of dust overlay the smooth, gray-green plastic. Lafayette drew a finger across the surface, leaving a distinct mark that glowed more brightly than the surrounding area.

"The accumulation of a few days—or a few weeks," he assessed. "So whatever this is, it hasn't been here long . . ."

There was a small name plate attached to the side of the box. Lafayette could barely make out the lettering in the weak light:

STASIS POD, MARK XXIV

220 v., 50 amp, 12 HP

Below this terse legend, other words had been carefully defaced, the metal scraped bare. Lafayette felt a deeper excitement stir within him.

"More Central equipment," he murmurred. "First the Focal Referent—plus rumors of more of the same in a cave; then this—in another cave. There has to be a connection—and the connection has to tie in with me being somebody I'm not . . ."

He felt over the plastic case for further clues to its nature; under his hands he could feel a minute vibration, plus a barely perceptible sensation as of electrical current flowing over the surface. His finger encountered a small depression; as he explored it, a soft *click!* sounded from deep inside the container.

At once, the humming sound took on a deeper tone. Lafayette stepped back, startled. Further clickings and snickings as of closing relays came from the box. A sound remarkably like that of a blower motor started up. Lights winked on the panel. Needles stirred and jumped on dials, moving toward red lines.

Lafayette grabbed for the switch he had tripped, poked and prodded at it frantically; but the process he had set in motion proceeded serenely. He searched for another switch; there wasn't one. On all fours, he peered at the instruments' faces, but their readings were cryptic: 97.1 SBT; BM 176 . . . 77 . . . 78; NF 1.02; IAP 15 kpsc.

"Now I've done it," he muttered. Scrambling to his feet, he cracked his head a dizzying blow on the underside of the container. Through the momentary haze, it seemed that the top of the case was slowly sliding back, revealing an interior lined with padded red satin.

"It looks like Dracula's coffin," he

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mumbled, holding his head in both hands. "It even has . . ." His voice faltered as the retracting cover revealed a pair of feet clad in pointed black shoes. "It even has feet like Dracula . . . and . . ."

Now a pair of purple-clad legs were visible. A long cloak swathed the knees and upper legs. There was a heavy gold chain at the waist. A pair of long-fingered, knuckly hands were folded on the broad chest. From them, rings winked in the gloom. A white beard appeared, clothing an age-lined but powerful chin. A great hawk-nose came into view, closed eyes under bushy black eyebrows, a noble sweep of forehead, a purple velvet skullcap atop back-swept white locks.

"Not Dracula after all," O'Leary managed. "It's Merlin . . ." He watched in total fascination as the sleeper's chest rose and fell. A finger stirred. The lips parted, uttered a sigh. The eyelids fluttered, opened. Lafayette stared into a pair of immense, violet-pale eyes which fixed on him in a piercing stare.

"I, ah, I'm sorry, sir," O'Leary said hastily. "I just happened along, and, I, ah, accidentally seem to have, er, interfered with your arrangements. I hope I haven't caused you any serious inconvenience . . .". As he spoke he backed away, followed by those hypnotic eyes.

"I'll go for help," he said, edging toward the exit, "and before you know it . . ." His voice trailed off as the staring eyes bored fixedly into his. The old man sat up suddenly, an expression of ferocity contorting his noble features. He drew a deep breath, uttered a snorting roar, and lunged—

As if released from paralysis, O'Leary gained the entry in a bound, squeezed into the narrow passage, lost skin thrusting through the cleft. His foot trod air. He grabbed, slipped, yelled—

And was falling through space. For a long moment he was aware of the rush of wind, of the starry canopy wheeling above him—

Then a silent explosion filled the world with Roman candles.

3

HOW LOVELY, Lafayette thought dreamily, *to be lying in a big, soft bed, warm and cosy and without a problem in the world.*

Yes, indeed, a whispery voice said soothingly. *Now, just relax and let your mind rove back over the events of the last few weeks. Back to your first meeting with him. That was . . . where . . .?*

With who? Lafayette inquired off-handedly. *Or with whom?* He wasn't greatly interested. It was so much nicer just to let it all slide away on a sea of black whipped cream . . .

Tell me! the voice persisted, more urgently. *Where is he now? And where is it? Speak!*

Sorry, Lafayette replied. *I'm not in the mood for riddles right now. Why not go find someone else to play with? I just want to doze a little longer, and then Daphne will bring me a cup of coffee and tell me about all the nice things planned for the day, starting with breakfast on the balcony . . .*

He paused for a moment in these pleasant reflections to wonder what day it was. Sunday? Possibly—but it didn't seem like Sunday, somehow. And there was something else nagging at the corner of his mind, now that he thought about it. Something he was supposed to do . . .?

He tried to ignore the intruding thought and snuggle back into the dream;

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but the damage had been done. He was waking up in spite of himself, in spite of a subconscious instinct that told him that the longer he slept the better he'd like it . . .

He opened his eyes, was looking up at a canopy of what appeared to be woven grass and leaves.

"Ah, awake so soon?" a brisk, cheery voice inquired at close range. "What about a spot of breakfast, then?"

Lafayette turned his head; a round, wizened face beamed down at him.

"Who . . .?" Lafayette croaked, and cleared his throat, occasioning a sharp throb at the back of his skull. "Who are you?"

"I? Well, as to that—you may call me Lom. Quite. Good a name as any, what? And what do you say to Bavarian ham, eggs Benedict, oatmeal bread—lightly toasted—with unsalted Danish butter and a spot of lime marmalade; and coffee, of course. It's New Orleans style: I hope you don't mind a bit of chicory?"

"Don't tell me," Lafayette whispered, salivating profusely. "I've died and gone to wherever well-intentioned sinners go."

"Not at all, my dear sir," Lafayette's host chuckled gently. "You've taken a bit of a tumble, but we'll soon have you right as rain."

"Fine—but . . . where am I?" Lafayette raised his head, saw the rough walls of a lean-to made of sticks, and beyond the doorway the bright sunshine of a Spring morning.

"Why, you're sharing my humble quarters," Lom said. "I apologize for the somewhat primitive accommodations, but one does the best one can with the resources at hand, eh?"

"Haven't we met before? Your voice seems familiar."

"I doubt it—though one can never be sure, eh?" Lom looked quizzically at O'Leary.

"The last thing I remember," Lafayette said, "was falling off a cliff . . ." He made a move to sit up; pain lanced through his right arm.

"Oh, best you don't move about," the old fellow said quickly. "You've had a nasty fall, you know. But you were fortunate in descending through the tops of a number of trees before coming to rest in a dense fern thicket."

"What time is it?" O'Leary asked. "What day is it?"

"Oh, I should say it's half past ten," Lom said cheerfully. "As for the day . . . ummm. I fear I've lost count. But it was just last night—or more properly, early this morning that I found you. My, what a din you made!"

"Ten thirty. Ye gods, I'm wasting time—" O'Leary made another move to sit up; but Lom pressed him back.

"My dear chap, you mustn't think of venturing out yet! The consequences, I fear, would be most serious!"

"Not half as serious as they'll be if I don't get on my way," O'Leary protested; but he sank back, and Lom turned, lifted a laden tray onto his lap.

"There, now. A bite or two and you'll feel much better."

"Yes, but," Lafayette said, and took a mouthful of softly steaming egg. "Mmnnn hnngg mrrllnggg."

"That's a good chap. Now a bit of the ham, eh?"

"Delicious," Lafayette said, chewing. "But you don't understand, Mr. Lom. I'm not actually what I seem. I mean, things of vast importance are waiting for me to do them." He took a large bite of the hot buttered toast.

"You see, I have to . . ." he paused; under the mild gaze of the amiable old

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man, the disclosure he had been about to make sounded too fantastic to voice.

". . . to, ah, attend to certain matters," he said. "After which, I have to, uh, attend to certain *other* matters."

"Of course," the old man nodded in sympathy. "A bit of the marmalade?"

"I don't mean to be mysterious," Lafayette said, accepting the pale green jelly. "But it's highly classified, you see."

"Ah. Quite candidly, I wondered a bit as to just why you were abroad on the heights, but if you're on official business . . ." Lom smiled understandingly.

"Exactly. Now, how far from town am I?" Lafayette craned to look out through the gaps in the wall. The setting seemed to be one of wild-growing foliage.

"Not far—as the crow flies," Lom said. "But the country between here and the city is somewhat ifficult to negotiate, I must confess."

"If you don't mind my asking," Lafayette said, taking a hearty gulp of coffee, "how do you happen to live here all alone?"

The old man sighed. "True, it's lonely here. But peaceful. The contemplative life has its compensations."

"What do you do when it rains?" Lafayette persisted, noting the gaps in the fronded roof through which patches of bright blue sky were visible.

"Oh, I take appropriate measures." Lom dismissed the problem with an airy wave of his hand.

"You seem to do very well," Lafayette agreed.

"One becomes accustomed to certain small comforts," Lom said almost apologetically.

"Certainly—I don't mean to pry, Mr. Lom—"

"Just Lom—no Mister. I make no pretensions to worldly titles."

"Oh. Well, Lom, I certainly enjoyed my breakfast, but now I really have to be getting started."

"Nonsense, my boy. You can't stir for at least a week."

"You still don't get the Big Picture, Lom. The future of the kingdom depends on my getting the word through at once."

"I have an idea," Lom said brightly. "Suppose I carry the message for you?"

"That's very kind of you, Lom, but this is much too important to entrust to anyone else." Lafayette lifted the tray aside, sat up, ignoring a swarm of little bright lights that swam into view before him. He swung his legs over the side of the narrow pallet on which he lay, and watched with detached interest as the floor tilted up and struck him a ghostly blow on the head.

". . . really mustn't!" Lom's voice faded back in. Lafayette was back on the cot, blinking away the obscuring haze. "I can't be responsible for the results!"

"Guess I'm . . . little weaker . . . than I thought," Lafayette panted.

"Indeed, yes. Now about the message: what did you wish me to say?"

"This is noble of you, Lom," Lafayette said weakly. "But you won't regret it. Go directly to Princess Adoranne—or, no, better if you see Daphne first. That's Countess Daphne O'Leary. The poor girl will be frantic. Tell her where I am, and that . . ." O'Leary paused. "That, ah, there are certain artifacts—"

"What sort of artifacts?" Lom murmured.

"Sorry, I can't tell you. But anyway, there are these artifacts; tell her they're items Nicodaeus would be especially interested in. And they're hidden . . ."

"Yes?" Lom prompted.

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"Well, I can't tell you where. It's sensitive information, you understand. But if she'll get in touch with a . . . a certain party, he can show her where."

"May I ask the name of the certain party?"

"Classified," O'Leary said. "That's about it. Can you remember all that?"

"I think so," Lom said. "Something's hidden somewhere, and someone can tell her where to find it."

"Hmmm. When you put it that way, it doesn't sound like much."

"My boy, face the facts: it sounds like gibberish."

"In that case—I'll have to go myself, ready or not."

"If you'd just be a trifle more explicit . . ."

"Impossible."

"It's equally impossible for you to set out on a journey until you've regained your strength."

"Nevertheless, I'm going."

Lom stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Hmmm. See here, my boy—if you're determined . . . and I see you are . . . of course I wouldn't dream of standing in your way. Now, why don't you give yourself another few minutes' rest—time for your breakfast to digest, can't have—you getting stomach cramps—and then I'll speed you on your way."

"All right. I admit I feel a little rocky . . ." Lafayette leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Can't afford to go to sleep," he told himself. "The dizziness will pass as soon as I get on my feet and start moving. Can't be far—should reach a farmhouse in an hour or two—get a ride—be at the palace by early afternoon . . . put call through . . ."

"Yes?" said the operator. *"Central here. Your report, please."*

"This is Lafayette O'Leary. I'm calling from Artesia—Locus Alpha Nine-three—"

"I'm sorry, sir. No such locus is listed in the Central Directory. Kindly re-dial—"

"Wait a minute! Don't ring off! It might take me years to get through to you again! There's an emergency here! It involves a cache of illegal equipment, stolen from Central—"

"No report of missing equipment has been filed, sir. I must now ask you to hang up; the circuits are needed—"

"I've seen it! There's a thing called a Focal Referent—and something else, labelled Stasis Pod! And I have a report of a whole cave full of more of the same!"

"Highly unlikely, sir. You must have made a mistake—"

"I tell you I saw it! In fact, I have the Mark III tucked in a secret pocket inside my coat right now! I know what I'm talking about! I'm an accredited part-time agent of Central! If you don't believe me, talk to Nicodaeus! He'll tell you!"

"Our records indicate no one of that name in the service."

"Then your records are wrong! He's the one who helped me uncover Goruble's plot to take over the country!"

"Indeed, sir? And what is your name?"

"O'Leary! Lafayette O'Leary! Sir Lafayette O'Leary!"

"Ah, yes. I have a record of that name . . . But your voice does not agree with the coded pattern listed for Mr. O'Leary—and a visual scan indicates that your face doesn't match the photo of Mr. O'Leary in our files. I must therefore conclude that you are an impostor. The penalty—"

"I'm not an impostor! I just look like one! I can explain!"

"Very well. Explain."

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"Well—I can't actually explain, but—"

"If you have nothing further to add, sir, I must conclude this conversation now. Thank you for calling . . ."

"No! Wait! You have to get the information into the right hands before it's too late! Hello! Hello? Central?"

Lafayette struggled up from the dream, his shouts echoing in his ears. "Must have dozed off," he mumbled, looking around the hut. Lom was nowhere to be seen. Outside, the light seemed to have taken on a different quality: a late-afternoon quality.

"How long did I sleep?" O'Leary mumbled. He struggled up; he was light-headed, but his legs supported his weight.

"Lom! Where are you . . .?" he called. There was no answer. He stepped outside. The hut—a flimsy shack of sticks and leaves, he saw—was surrounded by a flat clearing no more than a dozen yards in diameter, ringed in by high bushes, beyond which distant peaks rose high into the dusk-tinged sky.

"Ye gods—it's almost dark. I must have slept for hours." Lafayette thrust through the encircling shrubbery—and stopped short. At his feet, a vertical cliff dropped away into dizzying depths. He backed off, checked at another point. In five minutes he knew the worst:

"Marooned," he groaned. "Stuck on top of a mesa. I should have known better than to trust anyone who lives in a grass hut and subsists on Bavarian ham."

Far below, the valley spread, green and orderly, a pattern of tilled fields and winding roads. In the distance, the towers of the palace sparkled, ruddy in the late sun. The nearest of the peaks looming beyond the airy gulf surrounding his eyrie were at least five miles away, he estimated.

"I fell here, eh? From where? And how did that frail little old man carry my 175 pounds into his hut unassisted? I must have been crazy not to have smelled treachery." At a sudden thought, Lafayette clutched at his coat.

The Mark III was gone.

"BEAUTIFULLY HANDLED, O'Leary," he congratulated himself half an hour later, after a fruitless search of the half-acre mesa. "You really came on like a champ every inch of the way. From the minute you got that idiotic note, you've been shrewdness personified. You couldn't have worked yourself into a tighter pocket if it had been planned that way . . ."

He paused to listen to the echo of his own words.

"Planned that way? Of course it was planned that way—but not by you, you dumbbell! The Red Bull must have been in on it; probably someone paid him to con me, and then . . ." his train of thought faltered. "And then—what? Why hijack me, give me somebody else's face, and strand me on a mountain top?"

"I don't know," he answered. "But let's skip that for now. The important thing is to get off this peak. Lom managed it. I ought to be able to do the same."

"Maybe he used ropes."

"And maybe I'm a kangaroo!"

"Possibly. Have you looked lately?"

Lafayette examined his hands, felt of his features.

"I'm still Zorro," he concluded. "Worse luck."

"And down there, someone is still on the loose with enough Probability gear to shift Artesia into the next continuum. And what are you going to do about it?"

As if in answer to his question, the sky seemed to flicker—like a bad splice in a movie film—and darken; not gradually, but with an abrupt transition from

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gathering twilight to deep dusk. Some small, fluffy-pink clouds that had been cruising near the adjacent peak were gone, whisked out of sight like dust under a rug. And that wasn't all, O'Leary realized in that same dizzying instant: the peak itself was gone—as were the neighboring peaks. He saw that much before the last of the light drained away, leaving him in total darkness. He took a step back, felt the ground *softening* under his feet. He was sinking down—dropping faster—then falling through black emptiness.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WIND shrieked past Lafayette's face, buffeted his body. Instinctively, he spread his arms as if to slow his headlong fall. The streaming air tugged tentatively, then with a powerful surge that made the bones creak in his shoulders. In automatic response, he stroked, angling his hands to cup the air. He felt the tug of gravity, the answering lift of giant pinions, sensed the sure, clean speed with which he soared out over darkness.

"Good lord!" he burst out. "I'm flying!"

2

THE MOON came out, revealing a forested landscape far below. For an instant, Lafayette felt a frantic impulse to grab for support; but the instincts he had acquired along with the wings checked his convulsive motion with no more than a sudden, heart-stopping dip in his glide.

"Keep calm," a semi-hysterical voice screamed silently at him from the back of his head. "As long as you keep calm, you'll be all right."

"Fine—but how do I land?"

"Worry about that later."

A lone bird—an owl, Lafayette thought—sailed close, looked him over with cold avian eyes, drifted off on owl business.

"Maybe I can stretch my glide," he thought. "If I can make it back to the capital and reach Daphne . . ." He scanned the horizon in vain for the city lights. Cautiously, he tried a turn, executed a graceful swoop to the left. The dark land below spread to the horizon, unrelieved by so much as a glimmer.

"I'm lost," O'Leary muttered. "Nobody has ever been as lost as this!"

He tried a tentative stroke of his arms, instantly stalled, fell off in a flat spin. He fought for balance, gradually spiralled out into straight and level gliding.

"It's trickier than it looks," he gasped, feeling his heart hammering at high speed under his sternum—or was it just the rush of air? It was hard to tell. Hard to tell anything, drifting around up here in darkness. Have to get down, get my feet on the ground . . .

He angled his wings; the horizon slowly rose; the note of the wind in his ears rose to a higher pitch; the buffeting of the air increased.

"So far, so good," he congratulated himself. "I'll just hold my course until I've built up speed, then pull out and . . ." The horizon, he noted, had risen still higher. In fact, he had to bend his neck to see it—and even as he rolled his eyes upward, it receded still further.

"Ye gods, I'm in a vertical dive!" he pressed with his outspread fingers—but it was like thrusting a hand into Niagara Falls.

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"There was nothing in *How to Solo Solo* about this," he mumbled, gritting his teeth with the effort. "Why in the world didn't I sprout inherently stable wings while I was at it . . .?"

A tree-covered ridge was rushing toward him with unbelievable swiftness; Lafayette put all his strength in a last-ditch effort. His over-strained wings creaked and fluttered. A dark mass of foliage reared up before him—

With a shattering crash, he plunged into a wall of leaves, felt branches snapping—or were they bones—?

Something struck him a booming blow on the head, tumbled him down into bottomless silence.

3

HOW LOVELY, Lafayette thought dreamily, *to be lying in a snow bank, dreaming you're in a big, soft bed, warm and cosy, with an aroma of ham and eggs and coffee drifting in from the middle distance . . .*

He paused for a moment in these pleasant reflections to wonder why it all seemed so familiar. Something was nagging at the corner of his mind: a vague feeling that he'd been through all this before—

Oh, no you don't, he cut the train of thought short. *I know when I'm well off. This is a swell hallucination, and I'm not giving it up without a struggle . . .*

"You've had that thought before, too," the flat voice of experience told him. "It didn't work last time, and it won't work now. You've got problems, O'Leary. Wake up and get started solving them."

Well, there's one consolation, he countered. *Whatever my problems are, they're not as silly as what I was dreaming. Wings, already. And a gang of Wayfarers on my trail. And a mummy that came to life, and—"*

"Don't look now, O'Leary . . . but you've got a shock coming."

Lafayette pried an eye open. He was looking out through a screen of oversized leaves at a vista of treetops—treetops the size of circus tents, spreading on and on—

He clutched convulsively for support as his eye fell on the curving expanse of rough-textured chocolate-brown bark on which he lay.

"Oh, no," he said. "You've got to be kidding. I *didn't really* crash-land in a tree-top after turning into a birdman . . ."

He started to scramble to his feet, felt a stab of pain that started at least ten feet beyond his fingertip and shot like a hot wire all the way up to his neck. Turning his head, he saw a great, sorrel-feathered pinion spread along the wide bough on which he lay, its feathers bedraggled and in disarray. He twitched his shoulder blades tentatively, saw a corresponding twitch of the unfamiliar members, accompanied by another sharp jab of pain—reminiscent of that occasioned by biting down on a bone-chip with a sensitive tooth.

"It's real," he said wonderingly. He sat up carefully, leaned over, looked down through level after level of foot-wide leaves. The ground was down there, somewhere.

"And I'm up here. With a broken wing, Zorp only knows how high in the air. Which means I have to get down the hard way." He studied the two-yard wide branch under him, saw how it led back among leafy caverns to the shadow-obscured pillar of the trunk.

"It must be fifty feet in diameter. And that's impossible. There are no trees that big in Artesia—or anywhere else, for that

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matter, especially with leaves like an overgrown sycamore."

"Right," he replied promptly. "Nicely reasoned. The tree's impossible, your wings are impossible, the whole thing's impossible. So what do we do now?"

"Start climbing."

"Dragging a broken wing?"

"Unless you have a better idea."

"Take your choice, O'Leary," he muttered. "Try it, and fall to your death, or stay here and die in comparative comfort."

"Correction," he reminded himself. "You can't afford to be dead—not while the Red Bull is itching to sell Goruble's hoard to any unsavory character with the price of a chicken dinner."

"Besides which," he agreed, "I have a few chicken dinners to eat yet myself."

"That's the spirit. Up and at 'em. *I saye and I doe.*"

Painfully, Lafayette got to his feet, favoring the injured member. The wings, he saw by craning his neck, sprouted from his back between his normal shoulders and the base of his neck. His chest was puffed out like that of a pigeon; hard muscle, he found, prodding himself with the long, lean fingers he now possessed. His face—insofar as he could determine by feeling it over—was narrow, high cheekboned, with small, close-set eyes and a widow's peak of bushy hair. Somehow, without a mirror, he knew that it was glossy black, that his eyes were a lambent green, his teeth snowy white in a sun-dark face.

"Goodbye, Zorro," he muttered. "It was a mixed pleasure being you. I wonder who I am now? Or what?"

There was a flutter among the leaves, a sharp *kweee, kweee!* A small white bird swooped on him. Lafayette batted at it in surprise, almost lost his balance, yelped aloud at the stab from his wing as he grabbed for support. The bird hovered, *kwee!*ing in a puzzled way. A moment later two more joined it. Lafayette put his back to a branch, fended off their repeated attempts to dart in close.

"Get away, blast you!" he yelped. "Don't I have enough trouble without being pecked by meat-eating cockatoos?"

More birds arrived; squawking indignantly, they circled Lafayette's head. He backed along the branch; they followed. He reached the giant hole. A dozen or more of the birds fluttered around him now.

"At least wait till I'm dead!" he yelled.

There was a sudden, shrill whistle from near at hand.

Abruptly, the birds flew up, scattering. The branch trembled minutely under Lafayette's feet. Leaves stirred; a small, slender figure stepped into view, swathed in a cloak of feathers—

No, not a cloak, O'Leary corrected his first startled impression.

Wings.

It was another flying man who stood facing him from ten feet away.

4

THE MAN was narrow-shouldered, narrow-faced, with a long, pointed nose, tight lips, peaked eyebrows above pale, glistening eyes. He was dressed in close-fitting green trousers, a loose tunic of scarlet decorated with gold loops at the cuffs. His feet were bare; his long, slim toes clutched the rough bark.

"It ik ikik;riz izit tiz tizzik ik?" the newcomer said in a reedy, musical voice.

"Sorry," Lafayette said, and felt the awkwardness of the word on his lips. "I don't, uh, savvy your lingo . . ."

"Thib, it ik ikik;riz izit tiz tizzik ik,

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izyik!" The flying man's tone was impatient—but Lafayette hardly noticed that. With one part of his mind he had registered only a series of whistling, staccato sounds—but with another, he had heard words:

"I said, what's the matter? Been eating snik berries?"

"No," Lafayette said, and felt his mouth shape the sound: *"Nif."*

"I thought maybe the zik-zik's had spotted a zazz-worm," the message came clearly through the buzzing and clicking.

"I thought they were trying to eat me alive," O'Leary said—and heard himself mouthing the same twittering sounds.

"Do you feel all right, Haz?" The flying man came forward, moving quickly, with a precise, mincing gait. "You sound as if you had a mouthful of mush."

"As a matter of fact," O'Leary said. "I don't feel too well. I'm afraid heights make me dizzy. Could you, ah, show me the quickest way down?"

"Over the side, what else?" The flying man stared curiously at Lafayette; his eyes strayed to O'Leary's wing, which he had propped against the bole for support.

"Hey—it looks like—good night, fella, why didn't you say so? That's a broken freeble-bone, or I'm a landlubber!"

"I guess," Lafayette said, hearing his voice echo from far away, "I guess . . . it is . . . at that . . ."

He was only dimly aware of hands that caught him, voices that chirped and whistled around him, of being assisted along the rough-textured path, of being lifted, pulled, of twinges from his injury, faint and far away; and then of a moment of pressure—pressure inside his bones, inside his mind, an instant of a curious vertigo, of the world turned inside out . . .

Then he was in cool darkness and an odor of camphor, sinking down on a soft couch amid murmurings that faded into a soft green sleep.

5

"THAT'S THREE TIMES," he was saying as he awoke. "My skull can't take much more of it."

"Of what, Tazlo darling?" a soft, sweet voice whispered.

"Of being hit with a blunt instrument," O'Leary said. He forced his eyes open, gazed up at a piquant feminine face that looked down at him with an expression of tender concern.

"Poor Tazlo. How did it happen? You were always such a skillful flyer . . ."

"Are you really here?" Lafayette asked. "Or are you part of the dream?"

"I am here, my Tazlo." A soft, slim-fingered hand touched Lafayette's cheek gently. "Are you in much pain?"

"A reasonable amount, considering what I've been through. Strange. I go along for months at a time—even years—without so much as a mild concussion—and then bam—bam—slam-bash! They start using my head for a practice dummy. That's how I can tell I'm having an adventure. But I really can't take much more of it."

"But you're safe now, Tazlo dear."

"Ummmnn." He smiled lazily up at the girl. "That's one of the compensations of an active life: these delightful fantasies I have while I'm waking up."

He looked around the room: it was circular, with vertical grained wood-panelled walls, a dark polished floor; a lofty ceiling, lost in shadows, through which a single shaft of sunlight struck. The bed on which he lay had a carved foot board, a downy mattress, comfortable as a cloud.

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"I suppose in a minute I'll discover I'm impaled on a sharp branch a hundred yards over a gorge filled with cacti or crocodiles," he said resignedly, "but at the moment, I have no complaints whatever."

"Tazlo—please . . ." There was a stifled sob in her voice. "Speak sensibly; tell me you know me—your own little Sisli Pim."

"Are you a Sisli Pim, my dear?"

"I'm Sisli Pim, your Intended! You don't remember me!" The elfin face puckered tearfully; but with an effort, she checked the flood, managed a small smile. "But you can't help that, I know. It's the bump on your head that makes you so strange."

"Me, strange?" Lafayette smiled indulgently. "I'm the only normal thing in this whole silly dream—not that you're silly, er, Sisli. You're quite adorable—"

"Do you really think so?" She smiled enchantingly. In the dim light Lafayette thought her hair looked like feathery plumes, pale violet, around her heart-shaped face.

"I certainly do. But everything else is typical of these fantasies I have when I'm waking up. Like this alleged language I'm speaking: it's just something my subconscious made up, to fit in with the surroundings—just gibberish, but at the moment it seems to make perfectly good sense. Too bad I can't get a tape recording of it. It would be interesting to know if it's actually a self-consistent system, or just a bunch of random sounds."

"Tazlo—please don't! You frighten me! You . . . you don't even sound like yourself!"

"Actually, I'm not," O'Leary said. "I'm actually a fellow named Lafayette O'Leary. But don't be frightened, I'm harmless."

"Tazlo—you mustn't!" Sisli whispered. "What if Wizner Hiz hears you?"

"Who's he?"

"Tazlo—Wizner Hiz is the Visioner of Thallathlone! He might not understand that you're just raving because of a blow on the head! He might take this talk of being someone else seriously! Remember what happened to Fufli Hun!"

"I'm afraid it's slipped my mind. What did happen to poor old Fufli?"

"They . . . Sang him Out."

Lafayette chuckled. "Sisli, anyone who's sat through a concert of the Royal Artesian Philharmonic isn't afraid of any mere choral group." Lafayette sat up, felt a sharp pain in the small of his back—a pain that seemed to originate from a point in mid-air, two feet above and to the left of his shoulderblade. He twisted his head, saw a bale of white bandages from which rather bedraggled russet feathers protruded.

"What—are *you* still here?"

"Who?" Sisli said in alarm. "Tazlo, you're not seeing invisible enemies, are you?"

"I'm talking about these infernal wings," Lafayette said. "I dreamed I flew through the air with the greatest of ease—until I crash-landed in a treetop. Then there was something about being attacked by meat-eating pigeons—and then a bird-man arrived, and . . . and that's all I remember." He rubbed his head. "Funny—by now I should be waking up and having a good laugh about the whole thing . . ."

"Tazlo—you *are* awake! Can't you tell? You're here—in Thallathlone, with me!"

"And before the flying sequence," Lafayette went on, frowning in deep thought, "there was the business of being marooned on a mountaintop. A pretty

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obvious symbolism, reflecting my feeling of isolation with my problem. You see, I'd found this Focal Referent—some kind of probability gadget, I think, stolen from Central—and I was having a terrible time trying to get word to the authorities—"

"Tazlo—forget all that! It was just a nightmare! Now you're awake! You're going to be fine—just as soon as your wing heals!"

"I find that if you run over a dream in your mind as soon as you wake up, you can fix it in your conscious memory. Now, let's see: there was the man in the cave—*that* was spooky! He was under an enchantment, I suppose—except that the logical part of my mind cooked up something called a Stasis Pod to rationalize things. He represents Wisdom, I suppose—but the way he attacked me suggests that I must have a suppressed fear of knowledge."

"Tazlo—why don't we step outside and get a little sunlight, maybe that will dispel these morbid fancies—"

"Just a minute; this is pretty interesting. I never knew you could psychoanalyze yourself just by dissecting your dreams. I always thought I approved of Science—but apparently it's a secret bugaboo of mine. Now, let's see—there was a little old man, too—a cherubic type, he found me after I fell over the cliff, and brought me home and gave me a marvelous breakfast." Lafayette smiled at the recollection. "At the time it didn't even seem strange that someone living in a grass hut would have a refrigerator full of gourmet items—"

"Are you hungry, Tazlo? I have a lovely big boolfruit, just picked."

"Sure, why not?" Lafayette grinned indulgently at the girl. "I may as well sample everything this dream provides—including you . . ." He caught her hand, pulled her to him, kissed her warmly on the mouth.

"Tazlo!" She stared into his eyes with a look of amazed delight. At close range he could see the velvety-smooth texture of her cheek, the long lashes that adorned her pale green eyes, the downy feathers that curled on her smooth forehead . . . "You mean—you really mean . . .?"

"Mean what?" Lafayette said absently, noting for the first time the graceful white pinions which enfolded Sisli like a glistening feather cloak.

"That—you want to marry me!"

"Wait a minute," Lafayette said, smiling. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Why, you . . . you kissed me, didn't you?"

"Well, certainly, who wouldn't? But—"

"Oh, Tazlo—this is the most wonderful moment of my life! I must tell father at once!" She jumped up, a slim, elfin creature aglow with happiness.

"Wait a minute—let's not bring anyone else into this dream. I like it just the way it is!"

"Father will be so happy! He's always hoped for this day! Goodbye for a moment, my dearest—I'll be right back!" Sisli turned, was gone. Lafayette tottered to his feet, grunted at a pang from his bandaged wing, stumbled after her—and slammed into a solid wall.

He backed off, groped over the rough-hewn wood surface, looking for the door through which Sisli had left.

"It's got to be here," he muttered. "I saw her with my own eyes—or at least with the eyes I happen to be using at the moment . . ." But five minutes' search disclosed no opening whatever in the seamless walls.

"My boy!" a whistling nasal voice exclaimed behind him; he whirled; a

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gnarled, wizened ancient stood in the center of the room, his face beaming in a toothless smile. "My little girl has just given me the happy tidings! Congratulations! I give my consent, of course, dear lad! Come to my arms!" The old boy rushed forward to embrace Lafayette, who stared in bewilderment over the old fellow's featherless skull at a pair of muscular youths who had appeared silently and stood with folded arms and expressions of slightly bored indulgence, flanking Sisli Pim.

"Father says we can have the ceremony this very evening, Tazlo!" she cried. "Isn't that marvelous?"

"Things are going too fast," Lafayette said. "You're leaping to conclusions," he paused, noting the sudden hostility in the expressions of the two young fellows—probably her brothers, O'Leary decided.

"About what?" one of them demanded.

"I mean—I'm very fond of Sisli, of course—but—"

"But what?" the other youth snapped.

"But I can't—I mean—well, confound it, I can't marry her—or anyone else!"

"Eh? What's this?" the oldster chirped, rearing back to gaze up at Lafayette with eyes as sharp as talons. "Can't marry my daughter?" Sisli Pim uttered a wailing cry. The two brothers stepped forward threateningly.

"What I mean is—I'm not eligible!" Lafayette blurted, backing a step.

"Not eligible—how?" the old man inquired, his gaze impaling O'Leary.

"You own the requisite number of acorns, right?" one of the young men demanded.

"And you have an adequate nest, right?" the other pressed.

"And you *did* kiss her," the first pointed out.

"And she didn't knife you," said his companion. "Which means she accepts you, right?"

"So what could possibly stand in your way?" the old man crowed, as if the problem were solved.

"It's just that . . . that . . ."

"Tazlo—you haven't . . . haven't . . . you didn't . . . ?"

"You don't mean, I suppose, that you've contracted an understanding with some other maid of Thallathlone?" the larger brother asked in an ominous tone.

"Certainly not! But I can't ask Sisli Pim to marry me," Lafayette said flatly. "I'm sorry I kissed her. I didn't mean it."

There was a sudden movement, a whistle of steel on leather, and a knife was poking Lafayette'e throat, gripped in the hard, brown fist of the smaller of the brothers.

"Sorry you kissed my sister, eh?" he hissed.

"No—as a matter of fact I'm *not* sorry," Lafayette snapped, and stamped down hard on the knife-wielder's instep, at the same time chopping outward at the offending wrist, while ramming a fist into the youth's ribs. The lad doubled over, coughing and hopping on one foot.

"As a matter of fact I enjoyed it a lot," O'Leary said defiantly. "But the fact is, I never saw Sisli in my life before ten minutes ago. How can you want her to marry a stranger?"

"Never saw . . .?" the old man quavered, waving back the other brother. "What can you mean? You were raised together! You've seen each other almost daily for the past twenty-one years!"

"Father—I think I understand," Sisli cried, thrusting herself between Lafayette and her male relatives. "Poor Tazlo feels it wouldn't be fair to marry me, in his condition!"

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"Condition? What condition?" Father said querelously.

"In the fall—when he broke his wing—he suffered a blow on the head, and he's lost his memory!"

"A likely tale," the elder brother growled.

"How did he happen . . . unh . . . to fall in the first place?" the younger brother grunted, massaging his stomach, wrist and shin simultaneously.

"Yes—how did you happen to fall, Tazlo—you of all people," the old man asked. "An expert wingsman like you."

"It's a long story," Lafayette said shortly. "You wouldn't understand—"

"Please—how can he tell you?" Sisli protested. "He remembers nothing."

"He remembered how to kiss unsuspecting young females," the younger brother growled.

"Look, fellows—why don't you just forget that? It was a mistake, I admit it. I'm sorry if I caused any misunderstanding—"

"Misunderstanding? This silly goose came rushing up to us, blurted out the glad tidings where half the eyrie heard her! We'll all be a laughingstock—especially if we go off and leave you here in her chamber, unchaperoned!"

"Well then, I'll go elsewhere. I'm not looking for trouble. Just direct me to the nearest telephone—"

"Nearest what?" three voices chimed as one.

"Well, telegraph station, then. Or police station. Or bus station. I have to get a message through—"

"Whats he talking about?"

"He must be raving."

"I think Wizner Hiz ought to know about this."

"No! Tazlo hasn't done anything!" Sisli spoke up. "He'll be fine—just as soon as you go away and leave us alone!"

"Not likely," Younger Brother said grimly. "You come with us, girl—and I'll see to it Haz is moved to a bachelor nest—"

"He needs me! Now get out—both of you—and Father, if you side with them—"

"I never take sides," the old man said quickly. "Calmly, my child. We'll take the matter under advisement. Something will have to be done. In the meantime—suppose we simply keep the entire matter, ah, confidential, eh? No need to give sharp tongues fodder to gnaw on."

"Then you'll have to leave Tazlo here," Sisli said flatly. "If he leaves, everyone will know that . . . that something's amiss."

"Bah, the chit is right," the Younger Brother said.

"Tazlo—hadn't you best lie down?" Sisli said, taking Lafayette's hand.

"I'm fine," Lafayette said. "But they're right. I can't stay here." He turned to the three male members of the family—

Except for himself and Sisli, the room was empty.

"Where did they go?"

"Umm." Sisli looked thoughtful. "Father's hurrying along to his uncle Timro's perch, probably to discuss the situation over a cup or two of bool cider; and Vugdo and Henbo are standing about twenty feet away, talking. I don't think they're too well pleased. But you know that as well as I, Tazlo."

"How did they get out?"

"They just . . . went, of course. What do you mean?"

"I looked for a . . . door," Lafayette stumbled over the word. "I couldn't find one."

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"What's a *dooor,* Tazlo?"

"You know: the part of the wall that moves—swings out, or slides sideways. I can't seem to think of the word for it in Thallathlonian."

Sisli looked interested. "What's it for, Tazlo? Just decoration, I suppose—"

"It's to get in and out by. You know. A *door!*"

"Tazlo—you don't need a *dooor*—whatever that is—to go out. I think that bump on your head—"

"All right, then: how do you go out without a door?"

"Why—like this . . ." Sisli turned to the wall, and stepped to it—*through* it. Lafayette saw her advancing foot sink into the solid wood, followed by her body, the tips of her trailing wings disappearing last, leaving the wall as unbroken as before. He jumped after her, ran his hands over the grainy wood. It was solid, slightly warm to the touch—

Sisli reappeared just under his chin, bumped him lightly as he jumped back. She laughed, rather uncertainly.

"How—how in the world did you do that?" he gasped.

"Tazlo—you *are* just playing a game, aren't you . . .?"

"Game? The game of going out of my mind—" Lafayette caught himself, drew a breath, managed a shaky laugh of his own.

"I keep forgetting. I'd just about decided this was all real instead of a dream. Then you walk through a wall and spoil the illusion. But it's really time I woke up." He slapped his cheeks lightly. "Come on, O'Leary—wake up! Wake up!"

"Tazlo!" Sisli caught his wrists. "Please—stop acting like one who's lost his wits! If Wizner Hiz should see you—terrible things would happen!"

"I've always had this trouble with too-vivid dreams," Lafayette said. "And it's been worse since I read all those books on mesmerism and hypnogogia. If Central didn't have a Suppressor focussed on me, I'd be tempted to think I'd been transferred into another probability continuum—"

"Please, Tazlo," Sisli wailed. "Why don't you lie down and have another nice nap—"

"That's just the trouble, Sisli: I'm asleep now, and dreaming you. I have to wake up and get busy saving the kingdom—"

"Save what kingdom?" Thallathlone isn't a kingdom—it's a limited mythocracy!"

"I'm talking about Artesia. It's a bit old-fashioned in some ways, but all in all a very nice place. I used to be a king there—at least I was for a few days, until I could abdicate in favor of Princess Adoranne. That was after I killed Lod, the two-headed giant, and his pet dragon. It wasn't really a dragon, of course, just an allosaurus Goruble had transferred in from a primitive locus—and—"

"Tazlo—lie down, just close your eyes and all these wild fancies will evaporate!"

"They're not wild fancies. *This* is the wild fancy. Don't you see how ridiculous it all is? People with wings, who walk through walls? Typical dream-images, probably reflecting a subconscious wish on my part to be freed of all restraints—"

"Tazlo—*think!* Of course we have wings! Otherwise how could we fly? And of course we walk through walls; how else would we get outside?"

"That's just it—it has all the illogical internal logic of a well-organized dream."

"All that talk about giants and dragons—*that's* the fantasy; Tazlo—don't you see that? They're

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symbols of the obstacles you feel you have to overcome; and that bit about being a king—a transparent wish-fulfilment. By imagining you abdicated, you have all the prestige of royalty without the responsibilities."

"Say—you know the jargon pretty well yourself. But I suppose that's to be expected, if you're a creation of my subconscious."

Sisli stamped her foot. "*Your* subconscious! Tazlo Haz, I'll have you know that I'm a real, live, three-dee, living color female, and your subconscious has nothing to do with it!" She threw her arms around Lafayette's neck, kissed him long and warmly.

"There!" she gasped. "Now tell me I'm your imagination!"

"But—but if you're real," Lafayette stammered, "then . . . what about Artesia—and the Red Bull and the cave full of gimmicks, and the old man in the coffin, and Lom, and—"

"Just something you dreamed, Tazlo dear," Sisli murmurred. "Now lie down and let me feed you some cold boolfruit, and we'll talk about our future."

"Well . . ." Lafayette hesitated. "There's just one thing:" He eyed the blank walls that encircled him. "It's all very well for you to walk through solid wood—and your pop and brothers, too, it seems. But what about me? How do *I* get outside?"

"Tazlo, Tazlo—you've been walking through walls since you were a year and a half old!"

"I guess that's about when I learned to walk—but not through teak panelling."

"Silly boy. Come . . . I'll show you." She took his hand, led him to the wall, slid into it. Lafayette watched as the wood engulfed her flesh, her body merging with the wall as if she were sinking into opaque water. Only her arm protruded, holding his hand. It withdrew swiftly, the wood closing about her forearm, her wrist—

Lafayette's fingers rammed the wood with a painful impact. Sisli's hand still gripped his; she tugged again. He pulled away, was rubbing his skinned knuckles as she reappeared, a worried expression in her wide eyes.

"Tazlo—what's the matter?"

"I told you I couldn't walk through walls!"

"But—but, Tazlo—you *have* to be able to!"

"Facts are facts, Sisli."

"But—if you can't walk through the wall . . ." Her expression was frightened.

"Then I guess I'll have to chop my way out. Can you get me an axe?"

"An *axe?*"

He described an axe.

"There's nothing like that in Thallathlone. And if there were—how long would it take you to cut through six feet of solid kreewood? It's harder than iron!"

Lafayette sank down on the bed. "Great. I'm trapped here. But—how did they get me inside . . .?"

Before Sisli could answer, Vugdo—the younger brother—stepped through the wall.

"I've just had a chat with Wizner Hiz," he said. "Now, don't get upset with me," he added as Sisli whirled on him. "He sought me out, asked me how Haz was. I told him he was all right. So . . . he wants to see him."

"Vugdo—how could you?" Sisli wailed.

"He'll have to face him sooner or later. And the sooner the better. If Haz does anything to rouse the old devil's suspicions—well, you know how Wizner

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is."

"How . . . how soon does he want to see him?"

"He said right now; tonight."

"No!"

"But I stalled him off—until tomorrow morning. I said he had a headache." Vugdo gave Lafayette a sour look. "I didn't tell him his headache is nothing compared with the headache I've got."

After Vugdo had left, Sisli looked at Lafayette with wide, fearful eyes.

"Tazlo—what can we do?"

"I don't know, kid," Lafayette said grimly. "But we'd better get busy doing it."

CHAPTER FIVE

"LET'S START at the beginning and see if we can make some sense out of this," Lafayette said in a calm, reasonable tone. "Now, I was safe at home, perfectly contented, when I got the note from the Red Bull—"

"Wrong," Sisli said with a shake of her head that made the violet plumes wave adorably. "You were off on one of your hunting expeditions, determined to bring home a pair of gold-crested wiwi-birds to be our hearth-companions after we've set up our nest."

"Very well—if you say so. So I *dreamed* I was in Artesia, getting a note from the Red Bull. And on impulse I did as he asked; went out alone, in the middle of the night, for a mysterious rendezvous at the Axe and Dragon."

"If you were so content—in this dream," Sisli said, "why did you do anything as silly as that?"

Lafayette sighed. "I guess I've always had a romantic streak," he confessed. "Just when everything is at its best, I get this restless urge to adventure. And I suppose the idea of going back to the Axe and Dragon had something to do with it. That's where it all started, you know—"

"No—I don't know. Tell me."

"Well—where should I begin? Back in Colby Corners, USA, I suppose. I was a draftsman. I worked at the foundry. It wasn't very challenging work. But I used to do a lot of reading. I read up on hypnotism. One evening I was trying out a few of the techniques I'd picked up from Prof. Shimmerkopf's book, and . . . well, there I was, in Artesia, walking down a cobbled street in the twilight, with the smell of roast goose and stout ale coming from this tavern—the Axe and Dragon."

"In other words—you admit Artesia was imaginary!" Sisli said triumphantly.

"Well . . . I suppose in terms of Colby Corners and the foundry and Mrs. MacGlint's Clean Rooms and Board it was a dream—but once I was there, it was as real as Colby Corners had ever been—realer! I was having adventures, doing all the things I'd always dreamed of doing, having the kind of adventures I'd always wanted—"

"Wish-fulfilment—"

"Please—stop saying 'wish-fulfilment'. I can't remember wishing I was accused of kidnapping the Princess and thrown in jail—or lost in the desert—or locked in a torture cage by Lod."

"But you escaped from all these dilemmas?"

"Well—certainly. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here. In fact, I'm not sure I *am* here. How can I be sure? A dream seems real while you're dreaming it. You can pinch yourself—but you can dream you pinched yourself—and even dream

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you woke up, and—"

"Tazlo—please—don't let yourself get so excited. You were telling me about your dream-world of Artesia . . ."

"Yes. Well, I ended up living in the palace as a sort of permanent guest of Princess Adoranne—"

"This Princess—was she pretty?"

"Incredible. Golden hair, big blue eyes—"

"Blue eyes? How grotesque."

"Not at all; on the contrary. And a figure like an angel—"

"You—you were in love with this creature?"

"Well—I thought I was for a while—but . . ."

"But? But what?"

"But," Lafayette temporized, suddenly noting the edge Sisli's voice had acquired, "but of course in the end I realized I wasn't really in love with her—so she married Count Alain and lived happily ever after—at least for a while."

"While you occupied luxury quarters in her palace. How cosy."

"Believe me, she and I were good friends, that's all. And Count Alain was rated the top swordsman in the kingdom, by the way—"

"So—it was only fear of this redoubtable warrior that kept you from her?"

"Who, Alain? Nonsense. I fought a duel with him once and won—with a little help from Daphne, of course—"

"Who," Sisli said coldly, "is Daphne?"

"Why, Daphne is . . . is the former upstairs maid," Lafayette amended his statement. "But I mustn't get distracted from trying to figure out what's real and what isn't," he hurried on. "Anyway, there I was in Artesia, meeting the Red Bull. I thought—well, I thought it would be like old times, but somehow it wasn't. Even the Red Bull seemed different, somehow—he didn't seem to have any conscience anymore—"

"Things are always changed around in dreams, Tazlo."

"I suppose so. But that wasn't the biggest change. The Red Bull stepped out back for a moment, and suddenly—well, this part is very hard to explain. But suddenly—I was somebody else."

"It happens all the time in dreams," Sisli said sympathetically. "But now you're awake, and yourself, the same dear Tazlo Haz you've always been—"

"But I haven't always been Tazlo Haz! I was Zorro the Wayfarer!"

"I thought you said you were Lafayette Something, ex-king of Artesia! You see, Tazlo, how these different hallucinations keep shifting around?"

"You don't understand. It's all perfectly simple. First I was Lafayette O'Leary—then I was Zorro—and now I'm Tazlo Haz—only I'm still Lafayette O'Leary, if you know what I mean."

"No," Sisli sighed. "I don't. And this isn't helping our problem, Tazlo. You still have to remember how to walk."

Lafayette sat on the edge of the bed, gripping his head in both hands, ignoring the curious feel of short, curled feathers where his hair should have been.

"I have to come to grips with this," he told himself firmly. "Either I'm awake, and this is real, and I have amnesia—in which case I've always been able to walk through walls—or I'm asleep and dreaming—and if I'm dreaming, I ought to be able to dream anything I want to—such as the ability to walk through walls!" He looked up with a pleased expression.

"Ergo—either way, I can do it." He stood, eyed the wall defiantly, strode to it—and banged his nose hard enough to

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bring out a shower of little bright lights.

"Oh, Tazlo—not like that!" Sisli wailed. She clung to him, making soothing sounds. "Is it my itty bitty boy, can't even walk, poor Taz, there, there, Auntie Sissy will help . . ."

"I can walk through walls!" Lafayette snapped. "It's a perfectly natural thing to do in this crazy mixed-up place! All I have to do is hold my mouth right, and—" As he spoke, he had disengaged himself from the girl, advanced on the wall—and thumped it hard enough to stagger him.

"Tazlo—you're going about it all wrong!" Sisli cried. "There's really nothing difficult about it, once you get the feel of *merging*."

"Merging, eh?" Lafayette said grimly. "All right, Sisli—you want to help—teach me how to merge . . .!"

2

LAFAYETTE had lost count of the hours. Twice Sisli had gone out for food—bird-seed cakes and cups of sweet juices which in spite of their insubstantiality seemed to satisfy the inner man—or the inner whatever-he-was, Lafayette thought sourly. Once Vugdo had appeared, ready to lay down the law, but Sisli had driven him off with a flash of temper that surprised O'Leary. But he was no nearer to pushing his body through six feet of kreewood than he had been at the start.

"Now, Tazlo," the girl said with a gentle patience that Lafayette found touching even in his frustration, "relax, and we'll try again. Remember, *it's not difficult*. It's not anything that requires a tremendous effort, or any special skill. It's all . . . all just a matter of thinking about it in the right way."

"Sure," Lafayette said dully. "Like describing the difference between mauve and puce to a blind man."

"I can remember—just barely—the first time I did it," she said, musingly. Lafayette could sense the bone-deep fatigue in her, see it in the deep shadows under her eyes, the slump of her slim shoulders. But in the soft light from the glow-jar on the table, she still smiled lovingly at him.

"I was almost two. Father and mother had planned a treetop picnic. They'd told me so many times how it would be to see the outdoors for the first time—"

"The first time? At age two?"

"Of course, my Tazlo. An infant can't leave the nest in which it's born until it learns to Merge."

"Ye gods. What if the kid can't learn—like me?"

"Then—then it remains a prisoner for life. But that won't happen, Tazlo—it can't happen to you—to us!" Her voice broke into a sob.

"Now, now, take it easy, kid," Lafayette soothed, holding her frail, feather-like figure close to him and patting her back. "I'll catch on after a while—"

"Of . . . of course you will. I'm being silly." She brushed a tear away and smiled up at him. "Now, let's start again . . ."

3

THE GREY LIGHT of dawn was filtering through the light-aperture high in the wooden wall against which Lafayette slumped, fingering the newest bruise on his jaw.

"I guess maybe I wasn't meant for merging," he said wearily. "I'm sorry, Sisli. I tried. And you tried. You tried as hard as anyone could try—but—"

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"Tazlo—if you don't appear for your appointment with Wizner Hiz, he'll know something is wrong. He'll come here—he'll question you—and when he learns you remember nothing of your life—that you have these strange delusions of other worlds—then he'll—he'll—" Her voice broke.

"Maybe not. Maybe I can convince him I'm just a nut case. That my brains are scrambled. Maybe he'll give me more time—"

"Never! You know how he is about anything that even hints at a Possession!"

"No—how is he?"

"Tazlo—you can't have forgotten *every*thing!" Sisli sat beside him, caught his hands, clasped them tightly. "In his Visioning, if he sees anything—just the faintest hint that a Mind-gobbler has gotten a foothold in someone—Out he goes!"

"Out where?"

"Out—outside. Into the Emptiness. *You* know."

"Sisli, could we accept it as a working hypothesis that I *don't* know? You tell me."

"Well . . . it seems so silly to be telling you what everyone knows—but—once, many years ago, Thallathlone was invaded by creatures too horrible to describe. They took people's minds—grabbed them when they had lowered the Barriers so they could merge—and possessed them. At first, the victim would simply seem a little strange—as if he'd . . . lost his memory. But little by little, they began to . . . change. First, they'd start to lose their feathers; their bones would begin to grow; their plumage fell out, and wiry, thin hairs grew in its place. Finally, their wings would—would wither away,

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and . . . and drop off!"

"It sounds awful," Lafayette said. "But surely that's just a myth. People don't just turn into other people—" he broke off abruptly at the import of what he was saying. "I mean—not usually . . ."

"Exactly," Sisli said. "*I* know you're still really you, Tazlo dear—but . . . but it does look rather . . . rather strange—and to Wizner Hiz, it will look more than strange! He'll be sure you're a Mind-gobbler—and he'll . . . he'll Sing you Through! And then you'll be lost . . . gone forever . . ." She burst into tears.

"There, there, Sisli, don't cry," Lafayette soothed, holding her in his arms. "Things aren't all that bad. We still have a little time. Maybe I'll get the knack of it yet—or maybe he won't come after all—or—"

"I'll . . . I'll try to be brave." Sisli brushed away her tears and smiled up at Lafayette. "You're right. There's still time. We can't give up. Now try again: close your eyes, think of the wall as being woven of little lines of light. And the lines of light are only tiny specs that move very fast—so fast they aren't really there—and you reach out . . . you feel them, you match the pattern of your mind to them, and—"

"All right," Vugdo's blunt voice spoke suddenly beside them. "Wizner Hiz is waiting. Let's go, Haz."

The glowering youth stood just inside the impervious wall—impervious to O'Leary, at least, he thought disgustedly. Around here, every man, woman, and child over eighteen months had freedom to come and go—all but him!

"He's not ready," Sisli had jumped up, stood facing her brother. "Hiz will have to wait."

"You know better than that."

"Go away! You're spoiling everything! If you'd just give us more time—"

"It's not me—it's Wizner Hiz—"

"Yes, indeed it *is* Wizner Hiz," a new voice spoke, a sharp, thin-edged voice that seemed to slice between Lafayette's bones. He turned to see a lean, leathery-faced old Wingman, with a few gray plumes still clinging to his withered scalp, a nose like an eagle's beak, eyes like bits of glowing coal.

"And I am here," Wizner Hiz said in an ominous hiss, "to discover the truth of this curious matter!"

"There's nothing to discover," Sisli spoke up defiantly, facing the Visioner. "Tazlo had a fall; he hit his head. Naturally, he was a bit confused. But now . . . he remembers everything—don't you, Tazlo?" She turned to face him, her eyes bright with fear, and with determination.

"Well—there may be a few details I haven't quite remembered yet," he temporized.

"So? That is good news indeed," Wizner snapped. "But of course the matter is not one which can be settled so casually. The interests of all Thallathlone are concerned. People are afraid of the worst. They require reassurance. I'm sure you'll willingly join with me in laying all fears at rest."

"Of course he will," Sisli spoke up quickly. "But he needs more rest. He hasn't recovered—"

"I have no intention of overstraining an honest invalid," Wizner cut in harshly. "A few questions, a few tests, publicly given—nothing more. Then honest Tazlo—if indeed the subject *is* Tazlo—can return to his sick bed—if—he is still in need of special attention."

"Tomorrow! He'll feel much better tomorrow—"

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"Tomorrow may be too late, girl!"

"He might have a relapse if he has to go out now—"

"Suppose—" Wizner pointed a taloned finger at Sisli. "Suppose this man we call Tazlo Haz *is* in truth Invaded by a parasite from the dark spaces between the worlds! Would you nurture him here, assist him to prepare a place for others of his fell breed?"

"He isn't! I know he isn't!"

"Sisli—he has to be put to the test," Henbo interrupted. "Fighting it will only make it look worse for him. If he *is* Tazlo, it will all be over in a few minutes! It can't hurt him to answer a few questions, even if he is still a little weak—and he looks strong enough to me," he added, giving Lafayette a look that was far from cordial.

"He'll come with you now," Vugdo stated flatly. "Won't you, Tazlo?"

Lafayette looked at the wingman. He looked at Wizner Hiz. He looked at Sisli. He drew a breath.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid I can't oblige, fellows."

"No, you say?" the Visioner shrilled. "But I say *yes!* Vugdo—Henbo—take him!"

"Come on, you—" Vugdo caught Lafayette's arm; Henbo seized his injured wing in a secure grip, twisted as Lafayette held back. Sisli screamed. Her father made distressed sounds. Lafayette braced his feet, but the pain in the broken member was like a hot sword under his shoulder blade. They hustled him forward, slammed him against the unyielding wall with stunning force.

"What's this?" said Vugdo, who stood half in, half out of the wall, gaping at O'Leary. "Merge, man! Merge! This resistance is foolish!"

"Sorry," Lafayette said. "No can do. I seem to have forgotten how."

"Aha!" Wizner crowed. "You see? Proof! Proof positive! That was how we dealt with them last time, how we trapped them in the end! The Mind-gobblers had not our skill in merging! A wall of Kreewood trapped them like weeki birds in a cage! And so we caged them, starved them—"

"No! It's not true!" Sisli wailed. "He's simply forgotten!"

"Silence, foolish chit! Would you shield the monster in our midst?"

"He's not a monster!"

"So? How can you be sure?"

"Because . . . because I've looked into his eyes—and he's *good!*"

"Then let him step forth—and prove himself a Wingman!"

"It's no use, Sisli," Lafayette said. "I can't, and that's that."

"Then you admit you're a Mind-gobbler!" Wizner Hiz screeched, backing away. Vugdo and Henbo retreated, staring at him. Only Sisli still clung to his arm, until her father dragged her away.

"No," Lafayette said. "I don't admit anything of the sort."

"Come, let him prove himself," Wizner Hiz snarled. "We'll withdraw and leave him to himself. If he's a true man and not possessed, he'll emerge. If not—then let him be sealed up forever as a warning to others of his dread kind!"

In silence, except for Sisli's sobbing, Sisli's father and brothers trooped out through the wall as through a veil of dark brown smoke. Wizner Hiz took the girl's arm, dragged her with him, still protesting.

Lafayette was alone in the sealed room.

4

THERE WAS a little of the fruit juice left

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in the cups; O'Leary drank half, preserving the rest for later. He circled the room, vainly prodding and poking in search of some overlooked egress.

"Don't waste your time," he advised himself, slumping on the bed. "There's no way out—except through the wall. You're trapped. You've had it. This is where it all ends . . . trapped by a silly superstition. . . ."

"But," his thoughts ran on, "maybe it's not a superstition at that. In a way Wizner's right: I *am* an Invader. Apparently, this fellow Tazlo Haz is a real person—at least as real as any of this world. I haven't simply sprouted wings—I've taken over someone else's body. And it was the same when I was Zorro!" He rose, pacing the cell.

"Zorro really existed; he was a Wayfarer, with a girl friend named Gizelle, and a big career ahead as a pickpocket. Until I came along and swiped his identity. And then . . ." O'Leary paused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Then I switched identities again—with Tazlo Haz. And this time, I switched worlds along with bodies. Why not? I've done it before, more than once. The USA—Artesia—then half a dozen continua that Goruble dumped me into when he was trying to get rid of me—then Melange. And now Thallathlone."

He sat on the bed again. "But why? At first I thought it was the Focal Referent. I pushed the button, and the next thing I knew no one recognized me. But this time I didn't have the Mark III. I was just standing there. And another thing: always before the parallel worlds I've stumbled into had the same geography as Colby Corners. There were a few variables—such as the desert in Artesia where the bay was back home—but that was relatively minor. But here—nothing's the same. It's a totally different set-up, with a valley where the mountain was. And the people aren't analogs of the ones I knew—like Swinehild being Adoranne's double, and Hulk, Count Alain's . . ."

He rose again, paced restlessly. "I have to make a few assumptions: one, that I really did get a note from the Red Bull, I really did meet him at the A & D, and that somehow I changed places with Zorro—" He stopped dead. "Which implies . . . that Zorro changed places with *me!*"

5

"OH, BOY," Lafayette was still muttering half an hour later. "This changes everything. Nobody will be out looking for me. Or if they do, they'll find me wandering in a dazed condition, claiming I'm somebody named Zorro the Pig. Or they've already have found me. I'm probably back home now, with Daphne fussing over me, feeding me soup. Or feeding Zorro soup!" He threw himself down on the bunk. "Just wait till I get my hands on that slimy character! Posing as me, insinuating himself into Daphne's good graces . . ." He paused while a startled expression fixed itself on his face. "Why, that dirty, underhanded, sneaking louse! Taking advantage of poor Daphne that way! I've got to get out of here! I have to get home!" He sprang up, hammered on the wall, shouted.

The silence was total. Lafayette slumped against the wall. "Great," he muttered. "Pound some more. Yell a lot. All that will do is convince Wizner Hiz you're just what he claims—if anyone can hear you, which is doubtful. That wood's as hard as armor plate." He sat on the bed, rubbing his bruised fists. "And he's probably right. Thallathlone is obviously

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some kind of off-beat plane of existence, not a regular parallel continuum. Maybe it's on some kind of diagonal with the serial universes Central controls. Maybe people like me have accidentally wound up here before, just the way I did; maybe there's some kind of probability fault-line you can slip through . . ."

He lay back with a sigh. The ray of sunlight from above made a bright spot on the dark, polished floor. The perfume of Sisli still lingered in the air.

"Maybe a lot of things," he murmurred. "Maybe I'd better get some sleep. Maybe I'll be able to think better then . . ."

6

THE DREAM was a pleasant one: he was lying on the bank of a river, under the spreading branches of a sycamore, with Daphne beside him, murmurring to him in a soft and loving voice.

. . . try, please, for me . . . you can do it, I know you can do it . . .

"Try what?" Lafayette said genially, and moved to put his arm about her shoulders. But somehow she was gone now; he was alone under the tree . . . and the light had faded. He was in darkness, still hearing her call, faint, as from a great distance:

. . . just for me, my Tazlo . . . please try . . . please . . .

"Daphne? Where are you?" He rose, groping in the pitch darkness. "Where did you go?"

Come to me . . . come . . . you can if you try . . . try . . . try . . .

"Certainly—but where are you? Daphne?"

Try, Tazlo! You are trying! I can feel you trying! Like this! You see? Hold your mind this way . . . and move like this . . .

He felt ephemeral hands touch his mind. He felt the latticework of thought turned gently, aligned, steered. There was a gentle tugging, as if a cotton thread pulled at him. He moved forward, *listening, listening for her voice.* Cobwebs brushed his face, dragged back over his body, *through* his body . . .

Cool, fresh air flowed around him, filled with a soft, rustling sound. He smelled green, growing things; he opened his eyes, saw the twinkle of stars through the filigree of foliage above, saw lights that gleamed through leaves, saw—

"Sisli!" he blurted. "How . . . what . . .?"

She was in his arms. "Tazlo—my Tazlo—I knew you could do it! I knew!"

He turned, looked at the corrugated surface of shaggy bark behind him. He ran his hand over it, feeling the solidity of it, the denseness.

"Well, what do you know," he said wonderingly. "I walked through a wall."

CHAPTER SIX

WIZNER HIZ WAS still scowling; but even Vugdo had taken Sisli's side—and Lafayette's.

"You told us the fact that the wall stopped him proved he'd been Invaded," the Wingman said. "But sure enough, after he had a little time to get it together, out he came—just as Sisli said he would."

"You were the one that set up the test, Wizner Hiz," Henbo shrugged. "Don't complain when he passes it."

"Come along, Tazlo," Sisli said with a toss of her head. "The party is about to begin."

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Lafayette hesitated, looking out along the yard-thick branch with the shiny path worn along its upper surface, leading toward the lighted dancing pavilion. "What happens," he inquired, "if you slip?"

"Why should you slip?" Sisli walked out a few feet, stood on one toe and pirouetted, spreading her white wings just enough to make a sighing sound and stir the leaves around her.

"I've got a broken wing, remember?" O'Leary improvised. "I've got an idea: why don't we stay here, and just sort of listen in from a distance."

"Silly boy." She caught his hand, led him out on the precarious path. "Just close your eyes and I'll lead you," she said with an impish smile. "I think you just want to be babied," she added.

"Let's go," Vugdo said, jostling past Lafayette, almost sending him from the branch. "I have some drinking to catch up on, after the day I've been through."

O'Leary clung to a cluster of leaves he had grabbed for support; Sisli pulled him back.

"For heaven's sake, Tazlo—stop behaving as if you weren't one of Thallathlone's top athletes. You're embarassing me."

"Sure; just give me time to get my sky-legs." He closed his eyes and concentrated. "It's funny, Sisli," he said, "but if I just relax and sort of clear my mind—fit myself into the Tazlo bag—I start remembering things. Little bits and pieces, like, oh, sailing through the air on a sunny day—and doing power dives over Yawning Abyss—and even walking branches . . ."

"Well, of course, Tazlo; you've done them often enough."

"And . . . even with my eyes closed, I can feel you, standing there, six feet away. I can—sense Vugdo; he's about thirty feet away now, talking to someone. And I think Henbo has gone back . . . in that direction." He pointed.

"Well, of course we can sense each other," Sisli sounded puzzled. "How else would we manage to find our way back to the eyrie after a long flight?"

"I guess it figures. And all I have to do to walk these branches is just hold my mind right, right?"

"Right." Sisli giggled. "You look so solemn and determined, as if you were going to have to do something terribly brave and terribly important—all just to take a stroll down the front walk."

"All things are relative, I guess," Lafayette said, and stepped boldly out behind her toward the sounds of music.

2

LIFE IN THALLATHLONE was pretty nice, all things considered, O'Leary reflected hazily, relaxing at the nightly fete. If it wasn't one occasion for joy, it was another. Tonight's ball, for example, had been in celebration of the second week's anniversary of his vindication. The fermented booljuice had flowed freely; the air dancers had been skilled and graceful in their wispy scarves and veils, the toasted birdseed had tasted better than broiled steak—and Sisli, at his side every minute, had been as loving and attentive a prospective bride as a man could want.

That was the only thought that dampened his enthusiasm momentarily.

"But actually, everything will turn out fine," he reminded himself for the tenth time. "As soon as I figure out how to get back into my own body, Tazlo Haz will be back in his. He may have a pretty wild story to tell, but it can all be blamed on

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the bump on my head. And he and Sisli will live happily ever after."

Swell, he answered himself. *Just as long as you don't get carried away and spend the wedding night with the bride.*

"Which reminds me—that feathered fourflusher is probably romancing Daphne right now!"

Not any more than you're romancing Sisli.

"You mean he's kissed her?"

Wouldn't you?

"Certainly—but that's different. When I kiss Sisli, it's just . . . just friendly."

So is he. You can count on that.

"I'll break his other wing, that bird in wolf's clothing!"

Not until he's back inside the birdskin, I hope.

"Tazlo—who are you talking to?" Sisli inquired.

"Ah—just a fellow named O'Leary. A sort of figment of my imagination. Or maybe I'm a figment of his. It's a question for the philosophers."

"Isn't that who you said you were when you were still delirious?"

"I may have mentioned the name. But I'm much better now, right?" He blinked away the double images and focussed a smile on the girl's inquiring face. "After all—I *did* merge—and I walked the branches—and ate bird-seed—and—"

"Tazlo—you frighten me when you talk like this. It's as though—as though you were playing a role instead of just being yourself."

"Think nothing of it, m'dear," Lafayette said solemnly. "You're letting what old Wizzy said bug you. Lot of nonsense. Mind-grabbers indeed. Probably just some poor Central agent with a short-circuit in his probability wiring, meaning no harm at all."

"Harmless, eh?" an unfriendly voice snapped from near at hand. Wizner Hiz glowered from his perch a few feet above and to one side of the tiny table where Lafayette sat with Sisli. "I've been watching you, Haz—or whoever you are. You don't behave normally. You don't *feel* right—"

"Of course he's still a little strange," Sisli burst out. "He hasn't fully recovered from the blow on his head!"

"Go away, Wiggly Hig," Lafayette called carelessly. "Or Higgly Wig. Your sour puss bothers me. The night was made for love. Especially tonight, up here in a treetop. Back home they'll never believe all this . . ." He waved a hand to include the paper lanterns strung in the branches, the gaily dressed wingmen and women fluttering gaily about, the high moon riding above.

"Back home? And where might that be?" the Visioner said sharply.

"It's just a figure of speech," Sisli said quickly. "Leave him alone, Wizner Hiz! He's not hurting anyone!"

"Neither did the others—at first. Then they started . . . changing. You don't remember, girl; you were too young. But I saw it! I saw Boolbo Baz start turning into a monster before our eyes!"

"Well, Tazlo's not turning into a monster," Sisli said, and took his arm possessively.

"Course not," Lafayette said, and wagged a finger at the old Wingman. "Just the same old me—whoever that is. Get lost, Wiz—I mean Hiz—" He paused as something fluttered past his face. Twisting on his wicker stool, he saw a large, russet feather drifting down through the foliage below.

"Someone shedding?" he asked genially. A second feather followed the first. Something touched his arm: a third feather. He made brushing motions.

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"What's going on here?" he inquired as more feathers swirled around him. He stood, caught sight of Sisli's horror-stricken expression.

"Wha's . . . what's the matter?" he asked, and blew a downy feather from his upper lip.

"Oh, no—Tazlo, no!" Sisli yelped.

"Aha!" Wizner Hiz screeched.

"Grab him!" Vugdo bellowed.

"Grab who?" Lafayette demanded, looking around for the victim. His question was answered as hands caught at him, clamped on his arms, dragged him to the center of the dancing pavilion, amid a cloud of feathers.

"What's this all about?" he yelled. "I've passed your test, haven't I . . ." His voice trailed away as he caught sight of his unbroken wing, held in the grasp of half a dozen wide-eyed Thallathlonians. Even as he stared, another handful of feathers came free to swirl away in a sudden gust of wind.

"Not quite, Mind-grabber," Wizner Hiz rasped. "Not quite!"

3

FOUR STURDILY MUSCLED Wingmen with stout ten foot poles prodded at Lafayette, keeping him immobilized at the center of the cleared open-work pavilion. All around, the ranked population of the eyrie clustered in a circle, ten deep, all eyes on him. Sisli was gone, borne away weeping by her brothers. So far as O'Leary could tell, there was not a friendly expression in sight.

"Don't do anything hasty," he urged as a pole-tip poked him painfully in the ribs. "I can't fly, remember? I know it looks bad, but I'll think of an explanation if you'll just—*ooof!*" His appeal was cut short by a hearty jab to the abdomen.

"Never fear, we know how to deal with your kind," Wizner Hiz crowed. He rubbed his hands together, skipping about beyond the pole-wielders with the agility of a ten year old, shaping up the crowd.

"You there—back a few feet! Hold it! Now you, ladies—just move in here, fill up this gap. You—the tall one—move back! Now, Pivli Poo, you and Quigli step in here . . . close it up . . ."

"This looks like . . . a public execution," O'Leary pushed the words out painfully. "I hope you're not planning anything so barbaric—"

"All together, now," Wizner Hiz commanded, raising his hands for silence. He whistled a shrill note—like a pitch-pipe—and gestured. An answering note came from the massed voices of the eyrie.

"Choir practice? At a time like this?" Lafayette wondered aloud.

"It will be the last choir you'll hear in this world," Wizner Hiz shrilled, fixing Lafayette with a beady eye filled with triumph. "You're about to be Sung Out! Out of the world! Back to the dark spaces you came from, foul Invader!"

"Oh, really?" Lafayette smiled painfully. "What happens if I fail to disappear? Does that prove I'm innocent?"

"Never fear—the Chant of Exorcism has never failed," one of the strong-arm men assured him. "But if it does—we'll think of something else."

"Actually, it's just a simple case of falling feathers, fellows," Lafayette said. "It could happen to anyone—"

At a sweeping gesture from Wizner Hiz, a chorus of sound burst from the choir, drowning Lafayette's appeal.

Out of the world
Away and beyond
Back through the veil

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Stranger begone
Afloat on a sea
Wider than night
Deeper and deeper
Sinking from sight
Back where you came from
Grabber of souls
Back to the depths
Where the great bell tolls
Out of the world
Far from the sun
Of fair Thallathlone
Forever begone
Borne on the wings
Of the magic song
Forever begone
From fair Thallathlone . . .

The chant went on and on, waves of sound that waxed and waned, rolling at Lafayette from all sides, beating at him like the waves of the sea. There was a tune: an eerie, groaning, melody repeated over and over.

. . . *Out* of the *world*
Away and *beyond* . . .
Forever be*gone*
From *fair* Thallath*lone* . . .

The mouths of the singers seemed to move silently, like fish gaping in water, while the moaning chant, independent of them, rose and fell, rose and fell. The faces were blurring, running together.

. . . *Far and away* . . .
Stranger begone . . .
Forever begone
From fair Thallathlone . . .

The words seemed to come from a remote distance now. The lights had faded and winked out; O'Leary could no longer see the faces of the singers, could no longer feel the wicker floor under his feet. Only the song remained—a palpable force that enfolded him, lifted him, floated him away into lightless depths, then faded, dwindled, became a ghostly echo fading in utter darkness, utter emptiness.

4

LAFAYETTE STARED into the inky blackness, making vague swimming motions. Something that glowed faintly appeared in the distance, sailed closer in a great spiral, goggled at him with yard-wide eyes, spiralled off into the darkness.

"Which way is up?" O'Leary inquired; but there was no sound. In fact, he realized there was no mouth, no tongue, no lungs.

"Good lord! I'm not breathing . . . The thought seemed to jump forth and hang in space, glowing like a neon sign. Other bits and pieces of mind-stuff came swirling around him, like flotsam in a mill-race:

. . . oother-boober of the umber-wumber . . .

. . . try a section ooty-toot, or maybe a number tot noodle . . .

. . . told him to drop dead, the louse . . .

. . . eemie-weemie-squeemie-pip-pip . . .

. . . so I says to him . . .

. . . to the right, hold it, . . . don't move . . .

. . . HEY—I GOT A ROGUE BOGIE ON NUMBER TWELVE!

. . . smarmy parmy, whiffly niffly, weeky squeeky . . .

. . . aw, come on, baby . . .

. . . HEY—YOU——IDENTIFY!

. . . poom-poom-poom . . .

. . . so I ups to him and he ups to me and I ups to him . . .

. . . YOU! WHAT'S YOUR SNAG NUMBER!

. . . poopie-poopie-poopie . . .

. . . HELLO, NARK NINE. I'VE

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GOT A SPOOK READING IN NUMBER TWELVE STAGING AREA.

UH-HUH. I READ IT. JUST GARBAGE, DUMP IT, BARF ONE.

NIX—I PICKED UP A BEEP ON OH SIX OH, NARK NINE. COULD BE A ROGUE.

. . . nik-nik-nik . . .

DUMP IT, BARF ONE. WE GOT TRAFFIC TO HANDLE, REMEMBER?

HEY—YOU! GIVE ME A BEEP ON SIX OH OR I DUMP, YOU READ?

Something that resembled a tangle of glowing coat-hanger wire sailed purposefully up to O'Leary, hovered before him, rotating slowly.

"It looks like a disembodied migraine," he said. "I wonder if it would go away if I closed my eyes . . . if I had any eyes to close."

OK, THAT'S BETTER. NOW LET'S HAVE THAT SNAG NUMBER.

"Since I don't have eyes, obviously I'm not actually seeing things," Lafayette advised himself. "Still, some kind of impressions are impinging on me—and my brain is interpreting them as sight and sound. But—"

ANSWER ME, BUSTER!

"Who," Lafayette said. "Me?"

FLIPPIN A! SNAG NUMBER, PRONTO. YOU GOT TRAFFIC BACKED UP SIX HEXAMETERS ON NINE LEVELS!

"Who are you? Where are you? Where am *I*? Get me out of here!" Lafayette blurted, twisting to look all around him.

SURE—AS SOON AS YOU GIVE ME A SNAG NUMBER TO LATCH ONTO!

"I don't know what a snag number is! It looks as if I'm floating in some sort of luminous alphabet soup. Not the soup, the alphabet, you understand—"

A man came tumbling slowly out of the darkness toward Lafayette, end over end. He was dressed in what appeared to be a sequinned leotard, and he glowed with a greenish light; Lafayette leaped toward him with a glad cry. Too fast; he braced himself for the collision, caught a glimpse of a startled face twisting to stare at him in the instant before contact.

There was no impact; only a sense of diving into a cloud of whirling particles, tugged at by surging forces—

What in the name of two dozen dancing devils on a bass drum—! a strange voice roared.

Light and sound burst upon O'Leary. He was staring at a plastic plate attached to his wrist, with the stamped legend:

SNAG NUMBER 1705

LAST CHANCE, BUSTER! GOING . . . GOING . . .

"Snag number one thousand seven hundred and five!" O'Leary yelled.

From somewhere, a giant, unseen hook came, caught him by the back of the neck, and threw him across the Universe.

5

WHEN LAFAYETTE'S head stopped whirling, he was standing in a chamber no bigger than an elevator, with opalescent, softly glowing walls, ceiling, and floor. A red light blinked on one wall; there was a soft *snick!;* the panel facing him opened like a revolving door on a large, pale green room with a carpeted floor, a sound absorbent ceiling, and a desk behind which sat an immaculately groomed woman of indeterminate age, extremely good looking in spite of pale green hair and a total lack of eyebrows. She gave him a crisp look, waved to a chair, poked a button on her desk.

"Rough one?" she asked in a tone of businesslike sympathy.

"Ah . . . just average," Lafayette said

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cautiously, looking around the room, which was furnished with easy chairs, potted palms, sporting prints, and softly murmuring air conditioner grills.

"You want a stretcher, or can you make it under your own power?" the green haired receptionist inquired briskly as Lafayette edged into the room.

"What? Oh, I suppose you mean my bandaged wing. Actually it doesn't bother me all that much, thanks."

The woman frowned. "Psycho damage?"

"Well—frankly, I'm a little confused. I know it must sound silly, but . . . who are you? Where am I?"

"Oh, brother," the woman poked another button, spoke toward an unseen intercom. "Frink, get a trog team up here; and a stretcher. I've got a 984 for you, and it looks like a doozie." She gave Lafayette a look of weary sympathy. "Might as well sit down and take it easy, fellow." She wagged her head like one subjected to trials above and beyond the call of Job Description.

"Thanks." O'Leary sat gingerly on the edge of a low, olive-leather chair. "You, uh, know me?" he inquired.

The woman spread her hands in a non-committal gesture. "How can I keep track of over twelve hundred ops?" She blinked as if an idea had just occurred to her. "You're not amnac?"

"Who's he?"

"Mama mia. Amnac means no memory. Loss of identity. In other words, you don't remember your own name."

"Frankly, there does seem to be a little uncertainty about that."

"Right hand, index finger," she said wearily. Lafayette approached the desk and offered the digit, which the woman grasped and pressed against a glass plate set in the desktop, one of an array of similar plates interspersed with countersunk buttons. A light winked, fluttered, blinked off. Letters appeared on a ground glass screen in front of the receptionist.

"Raunchini," she said. "Dink 9, Franchet 43, under-category Gimmel. Ring a bell?" She looked at him hopefully.

"Not deafeningly," Lafayette temporized. "Look here, ma'am—I may as well be frank with you. I seem to have stumbled into something that's over my head—"

"Hold it, Raunchini. You can cover all that in your de-briefing. I'm strictly admin myself."

"You don't understand. The fact is, I don't know what's going on. I mean, I started off in perfect innocence to have a drink with an old associate, and when I saw what he'd stumbled on, I realized right away that it was a matter for—for higher authorities to handle. But . . ." he looked around the room. "I have a distinct feeling I'm not in Artesia; there's nothing like this there. So the question naturally occurs—where am I?"

"You're at Central Casting, naturally. Look, just take a chair over there, and—"

"Central? I thought so! Thank Groot! Then all my problems are solved!" Lafayette sank down gratefully on the corner of the desk. "Look, I have some vital data to transmit to the proper quarter. I've discovered that when Goruble defected, he stashed away a whole armory of stolen gear—"

A door across the room swung open and a pair of husky young men in crisp, pale blue hospital garb stepped into the room, guiding between them a flat, six-foot slab of what looked like foam rubber. The latter floated without support two feet above the floor, bobbing slightly like an

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air mattress on water.

"OK, fella," one of them said, unlimbering a large and complicated-looking hypodermic, "we'll have you comfy in two and a half demisecs. Just hop up here and stretch out, face down—"

"I don't need a stretcher," Lafayette snapped. "I need someone to listen to what I have to say."

"Sure, you'll get your chance, fella," the orderly said soothingly, advancing. "Simmer down—"

Lafayette scrambled around behind the desk. "Listen—get Nicodaeus! He knows me! What I've got to report is triple X-UTS priority! I demand a hearing, or heads will be rolling around here like spilled marbles!"

The orderly looked uncertain, glanced at the woman for support. She waved her hands helplessly. "Don't look at me," she said. "I'm just the flunkey on the front desk. Stand by one; Belarius is Duty Officer; I'll get him up here and let him stick his neck out." She poked buttons and spoke briefly. The orderly flipped a switch at the head of the stretcher; it sank to the floor.

Three minutes passed in a tense silence, with Lafayette hovering behind the desk, the stretcher-bearers yawning and scratching, and the green-haired woman furiously filing her iridescent green nails. Then a tall, wide-shouldered man with smooth gray hair and a professorial air strode into the room. He glanced around, pursed his lips at Lafayette.

"Well, Miss Dorch?" he said in a mellow baritone.

"This is Agent Raunchini, sir. He's apparently a 984 case; but he won't accept sedation—"

"I'm not Agent Raunchini," Lafayette snapped. "And I have priority information to report!"

"A contradiction in terms, eh?" The newcomer gave Lafayette a glassy smile. "Just go along, there's a good fellow—"

"I want to talk to Inspector Nicodaeus!"

"Impossible. He's on a field assignment, won't be back for six months."

"I'll make a deal," O'Leary said. "Listen to what I have to say, and then I'll go quietly, fair enough? Spurd knows I could use a nap." He yawned.

Belarius looked at his wristwatch. "Young man, I don't lightly upset the routine of this Center—"

"What about a Focal Referent in unauthorized hands?" Lafayette cut in. "Is that worth missing a coffee break for?"

Belarius' urbane expression drained away.

"Did you say—don't say it!" He held up a well manicured hand, shot a nervous glance at the others in the room.

"Possibly I'd best have a chat with Agent Raunchini after all," he said. "A private chat. Suppose we go along to my office, eh?" He gave Lafayette a smile like a warning blinker and turned to the door.

"Well, now we're getting somewhere," Lafayette murmurred as he followed.

6

THE GRAY-HAIRED MAN led Lafayette along a silent corridor to a small room, unadorned except for a row of framed photographs of determined-looking faces lining the walls. Belarius seated himself behind an impressive bleached oak desk, gestured Lafayette to a chair.

"Now, just make a clean breast of the

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whole matter," he said in a sternly avuncular tone. "And I'll undertake to put in a word for you."

"Sure, fine," Lafayette hitched his chair closer. "It was a Mark III. And according to—to a reliable source, there's more where that came from. With luck, he won't have had time to cart all the stuff into town and sell it—"

"Kindly begin at the beginning, Agent. When were you first approached?"

"Two weeks ago. I found the note rolled up in a pair of socks, and—"

"Who was your contact?"

"Let's leave his name out of it; he didn't know what he was getting into. As I was saying, the note told me to meet him—"

"The name, Raunchini. Don't attempt to shield your confederates!"

"Will you let me get on with it? And my name's not Raunchini!"

"Now you're claiming to be a prep, eh? That would imply a conspiracy of considerable scope. What do you allege to have done with the real Raunchini?"

"Nothing! Stop changing the subject! The important thing is to grab the loot before the Red Bu—before anyone else gets their hands on it—and to recover the Mark III!"

"Mark II. You may leave that aspect of the matter to me. I want names, dates, drop points, amounts paid—"

"You're all mixed up," Lafayette cut in. "I don't know a thing about all that. All I know is the Mark III was stolen from me while I was asleep, and—" He paused, looking at one of the photos, showing an elderly gentleman with a vague smile and a *pince-nez*.

"How? With a derrick?" Belarius asked querelously.

"What? How do I know? I had it in my secret pocket, and—"

"Pocket! Look here, Raunchini—don't attempt to make a fool of me! Your only hope for clemency is strict veracity and total recall!"

"My name's not Raunchini!"

Belarius glared, then turned to a small console at his elbow and jabbed at a button.

"Full dossier on Agent Raunchini," he ordered. "And double-check the ID."

"Look here, Mr. Belarius," Lafayette said, "You can play with your buttons later. Right now you need to get a squad in there to collect the stuff and find that Mark III before Lom uses it!"

Belarius turned as the panel behind him *beep!*ed.

"Definite confirmation of Raunchini ID," a crisp voice said. "Retinal and palm prints check out too. Junior Field Agent, assigned to Locus Beta Two-Four, Plane P-122, Charlie 381-f."

"Your wires are crossed," Lafayette said. "I'm Lafayette O'Leary—or I used to be. Right now I'm Tazlo Haz—"

"Stop babbling man! An insanity plea won't help you!"

"Who's insane? Why don't you listen to me? I'm trying to save your bacon for you!"

"I doubt if you've ever seen a Focal Referent," Belarius snapped. "You obviously haven't the faintest notion of the machine's physical characteristics."

"Oh, no? It's about six inches high, with a plastic case with a bunch of wires and wheels inside!"

"That does it," Belarius said flatly. "The Mark II is a great improvement over earlier models; but it still weighs four and a half tons, and occupies three cubic yards of space!"

"Oh, yeah?" O'Leary came back. "You obviously don't know what you're talking about!"

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"I happen," Belarius rasped, "to be Chief of Research and Project Officer for the Focal Referent program—which happens to be classified *Unthinkable Secret!*"

"Well—I'm thinking about it—"

With a quick motion, Belarius lifted what was obviously a hand weapon from beneath the desk.

"Send a squad of enforcers to Trog 87 on the double," he said over his shoulder to the intercom.

"Just a minute," Lafayette protested. "You're making a big mistake! I admit it looks a little strange, my having wings—"

"Wings?" Belarius edged backward in his chair. "Hurry up with that enforcer squad," he said over his shoulder. "He may get violent at any moment and I'd dislike to be forced to vaporize him before we get to the bottom of this."

"I can explain," Lafayette insisted. "Or—well, I can't explain it, but I can assure you it's all perfectly normal, in an abnormal sort of way."

"Never mind the protestations," Belarius said grimly. "Sane or otherwise, I'll soon have the truth out of you via brain-scrape. It may leave your cerebrum a trifle soggy, but in matters of Continuum security, there's no room for half measures!"

"Why don't you check my story out?" Lafayette protested. "What makes you so sure you know it all?"

"If there were one hard datum to check, Raunchini, I'd gladly do so!"

"Listen," O'Leary said desperately, "check on me: O'Leary; Lafayette O'Leary, part-time agent from Artesia!"

Belarius pushed out his lips, gave a curt order to the Intercom. As they waited, Lafayette's eyes strayed back to the photo which had caught his eye. He had seen that face somewhere . . .

"Who's he?" he asked, pointing.

Belarius raised an eyebrow, following O'Leary's pointing finger. His expression flickered.

"Why do you ask?" he inquired casually.

"I've seen him—somewhere. Recently."

"Where?" Belarius came back crisply.

Lafayette shook his head. "I don't remember. All those blows on the head—"

"So—you're going to play it cagey, eh?" Belarius snarled. "What's your price for selling out? Immunity? Cash? Relocation?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," O'Leary snapped. "I just—"

"All right, you've got me over a barrel! You know how badly we want to get our hands on Jorlemagne! I won't hassle! Immunity, a million in cash, and the Locus of your choice. Is it a deal?"

O'Leary frowned in puzzlement. "Maybe you've been wearing tight hats," he said. "You don't seem to grasp the idea—"

"Raunchini—I'll have the full story out of you if it's the last thing I do!"

"O'Leary!" Lafayette matched the others shout.

"O'Leary. Got it right here, Chief," the intercom blatted suddenly.

"Well, thank heaven," Lafayette sighed.

"Would that be Lorenzo, Lafcadio, Lothario, Lancelot, Leopold, or Ludwig?" the voice came back, businesslike.

"Lafayette," he supplied.

"Uh-huh. Here it is. Reserve appointment to classified Locus. Inactive."

"Physical description?" Belarius snapped.

"Six feet, one-seventy, light brown

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hair, blue eyes, harmless appearance—"

"Hey," Lafayette protested.

Belarius swiveled to face him. "Ready to come clean now?"

"Look, I can explain," Lafayette said, feeling the sweat start on his forehead. "You see, I accidentally activated the Focal Referent. It was unintentional, you understand—"

"And—?"

"And—well, I . . . I changed shape! Apparently I turned into this Tazlo Haz person, and—"

"You were transformed from O'Leary into Haz, is that it?" Belarius said wearily, passing a hand over his face. "Your story grows steadily more remarkable."

"Not exactly," Lafayette demurred. "Before I was Haz I was a fellow named Zorro."

Belarius sighed. "Doesn't this sound a trifle idiotic—even to your fevered brain?"

"All right! I can't help how it sounds; what matters is that there's a truckload of stolen Probability Lab gear lying there in the cave waiting for anybody who happens along, and—"

"And where might this alleged cave be located?"

"In Artesia—just outside the city of the same name!"

"Never heard of it." Belarius turned and snapped a question at the intercom, glared at O'Leary as he waited for an answer.

"Right, chief," the voice at the other end came back. "Here it is: Plane V-87, Fox 22 1-b, Alpha Nine-three."

"Are we carrying out any operations there?"

"Nossir. We closed the file out last year."

There was a short pause. "Well, I'll be graunched, sir. The classified Locus this Agent O'Leary was assigned to checks out as this same V-87, Fox 22 1-b, Alpha Nine-three, I'll have to post that to the file—" the voice broke off. "Odd, sir—it seems we have a new recruit on the roster, from the Locus in question, just arrived yesterday."

"Name?"

"O'Leary. Say, that's funny; O'Leary is coded inactive in the main bank—"

"You say O'Leary is here at Central Casting—*now?*"

"Affirmative, sir."

"Send O'Leary up to Trog 87 immediately." Belarius frowned bleakly at Lafayette. "We'll get to the bottom of this matter," he muttered.

"I don't get it," Lafayette said. "I'm down in your records as having arrived here yesterday?"

"Not you, Raunchini: O'Leary." Belarius drummed on the desk. There was a brief buzz from the door and four uniformed men entered with drawn handguns.

"Stand by, men," Belarius ordered, waving them back.

"I'll bet it's Lorenzo," Lafayette said. "Or possibly Lothario. But how could they have gotten to Artesia? They belong in completely different loci . . ."

A harassed-looking junior official entered, turned to usher in a second new arrival—a small, trim, feminine figure, neatly dressed in a plain white tunic and white knee-boots; she scanned the room with immense, dark eyes, a slight, anxious smile on her delicately modelled lips.

"Good lord," Lafayette blurted, jumping to his feet. "Daphne!"

—to be concluded—

—Keith Laumer

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CARDIAC ARREST

BRIAN ALDISS

Illustrated by SID CHECK

Every day we're exposed to the stultifying stimuli of melodrama. We grow up with it: in the comics, on tv, in the movies, in the books we read. But we do not live it. It is our fantasy, our vicarious stab at Adventure. We live mundane lives, surrounded by work, attempts at recreation, bills and neighbors. Only once in a while will a man cross over the schizoid boundary between mundanity and melodrama, substituting in his mind the cliches he has seen and read a thousand times for the reality he faces . . .

THE SENSATION Tindale had, with the strange virus in his veins, was that the world lay transfixed beneath his circling plane, awaiting his entry into human affairs again. Simultaneously: the contrary sensation that events were flowing swiftly by, just out of control . . .

After seventy-eight minutes of holding, the daily Pan-Pac Boeing from San Diego was signalled down on to Emergency Runway A. Careful not to infringe Chinese air space, it circled down across sea and land. The delay had been caused by a plane on a local flight, which had crashed and blocked a main runway. The passengers could see the dark smudge of smoke drawn across the field, impersonal, remote from human lives and deaths.

Among the Pan-Pac passengers was a slightly-built sandy man wearing an unobtrusive cream tropical jacket whose real name was Gordon R. Tindale. He was travelling under the name of Justin R. James; such was the name in his forged passport. His nervousness increased as the Boeing came in to land. Although the flight-captain had explained the cause for delay over the speaker system, Tindale believed that it concerned him more personally.

The Kai Tak runways heaved towards them, a dazzling grey. They poked like fingers into the sea. Blue flashed below the windows; only at the last moment, as they sank, did land appear under the wheels. They braked to a halt facing towards the dun-coloured distant hills of China. Loud silence. Unthought things in the mind.

For several minutes, the plane sat on its baking runway before the link coach arrived, the gangway was set in place, and the passengers were allowed to disembark.

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As he emerged into the sunlight, Tindale scanned the field for assassins.

A uniformed attacker driving fast in a powerful open car teeth clamped I fire back hit him in the shoulder I should have a gun and, the blonde the untrustworthy blonde with me meeting me in glamorous Hong Kong a dark girl putting her arms round me in the cool hotel bedroom she staggers down the gangway wounded and I'm hit we make it to the hotel laughing immortal putting her arms round me eyes closing I need a disguise.

He was living increasingly in a fantasy world; fear of death distorted his every thought.

Because of the crash, airport routine was upset. Passengers, half of them Hong Kong businessmen, were driven to an emergency customs post. Customs men, anxious to hurry everything through, let the whole party through almost without search.

Tindale began to breathe more deeply, in an effort to slow his pulse rate.

He had been told where to meet his contact in Hong Kong, on the other side of the water. Stop worrying until then.

As the bus drove them to the main exit of the airport, they could see fragments of the crash being dragged off the central runway. People had died.

At the gate, Tindale caught a taxi to the ferry. He had to share it with a Chinese who had been on the plane.

He looks harmless enough smiles good afternoon suddenly he leaped for my throat we grappled I got my knee in his groin he thrust a long deadly knife no he produced a revolver still smiling we've had you followed ever since you left the chemical plant nonsense perfectly harmless can I interest you in a very beautiful girl sir streets full of people

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breed like flies downtown . . .

Tindale stared out at the garish streets of Kowloon as they slid by; he thought it looked like an oriental version of Las Vegas, which he had visited once when his marriage failed, five years ago; he had never been outside the States before this.

At the ferry, he felt more confident. It did not worry him that he was alone and unguided; people thronging about him gave him a sense of being unobserved. Across the waters of the bay, Hong Kong island, Victoria climbing its steep sides, a mass of glittering skyscrapers challenging the sun. *American know-how.*

As the hovercraft carried him across the ship-flaked waters, the panorama extended its scale and began to envelop him, until he lost the whole picture in its details. The place thronged with things on the move. Hovercraft and helicopters and junks and vehicular railways and cable cars and automobiles and rickshaws moved on water and land and air, transporting these people about their short lives. Supposing all of them lived forever . . .

The crossing had not taken a minute. He was carried off the ferry in a wave of people. As he fished in his breast pocket for an address, a mopedshaw driver buttonholed him.

"Where you want go, boss? I take you any place on this island."

"Do you know . . ." He looked at the Chinese, those lips pursed in nervous eagerness, those dark eyes trying to assess him. Could this be a killer? "Do you know the Mukden Hotel, San Tin Road?"

Suddenly he leaped for my throat we grappled that's for you you yellow devil she appeared among the crowd beautiful inscrutable he pulled a gun on me you want woman you likey lady whole continent full of them millions and millions continent tipping towards Hong Kong he smiles he guesses

"Jump in, boss. I take you—five minutes get there!"

It took twenty minutes. Midday—streets thick with traffic. Even the mopedshaw held up at almost every intersection.

Mukden Hotel was some way from the waterfront; it occupied several floors of a shiny new building, above shops and a noisy restaurant. Its rooms, Tindale thought, were extremely expensive. He had a small room with a window aslant, from which he could see, between the buildings opposite, a view of the spectacular harbour with Kowloon beyond.

He locked the door and began to unpack, expecting a knock at any minute. He had registered in the name of Harris, George Harris, as instructed.

Crazy, he had been crazy! It was all too risky.

Okay buddy we're F.B.I. agents you can't do that I love him lady we can do anything I'm innocent blood tests the virus is you don't think the C.I.A. would let you get away with treason suddenly he leaped for his crotch look I can offer you a hideaway in China and immortal life if you keep your lousy stinking bribes okay Mack you're on and only if she they will be on my trail right now and I've left a trail a mile wide he had to disappear before sundown SECRET SERUM TRAITOR LEAVES HK CLUE

From his case, he took the little battery-powered refrigeration unit and placed it on the tiles in the corner of the shower. He sat down on the bed and lit a cigar. He looked round the room. He went to the window and peered out and down. All the crazy Chinese signs, many of them flashing even at noonday. In the street an

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air of frenetic gaiety. A constant clicking from somewhere below. He could not make out what it was, and so it worried him. The plumbing? The Chinese were sure to have bad plumbing, weren't they? An obscure smell in the room, rather pleasant; he couldn't connect it with sewers. Christ, he had been mad to chance everything. Everything.

He went and looked outside his door. A Chinese woman came out of the room opposite and moved towards the elevator, not looking at Tindale.

She came towards him eyes wide with sensuous appeal he grappled with her just a prostitute going on duty say honey don't I she said simply I am your contact Turner as she reached the elevator door he swung her round and on her breast a brilliant ruby she came towards just a guest plate of chop suey good here wait for Turner there was a knock on the door.

A paperback, a spy thriller, *Low Point X*, that he had picked up at the San Diego airport, before the plane had zoomed off across the Pacific. He tried to read it. It all took place in Europe. *Europe was the most remote spot on the globe right now.* Zurich. Copenhagen. Oslo. Europe was the most remote spot on the globe right now.

The F.S. boys and I stared in horror at the little rectangle sweating I drawled now I figure it an ultra-volt-micro-flash-mechanism triggers off H-bombs get it a big deep Scotch on the rocks my guts all of Oslo's a thousand megaton bomb as of now couldn't hurt to go and eat lovely smell in the windows downtown that goddamned clicking as of now it was 12.18 it's nearly seventeen hundred amber and real cold with a big Bering to drag on then food I'm not just a waitress sir but what made me sweat most was the two snide city gents standing plumb behind us covering us with maybe a lobster dish and a lager small 9mm Italian Mod. 34 Beretta automatics in all Oslo the street was full of restaurants what I could see safer not to eat here in the hotel mind if I siddown buddy better nearby much safer Bourbon a big one sorry sonny I snapped him a professional leaving the fridge here better hang around for Turner another hour till six here's hoping I snapped him a professional punch straight

He gave up reading before six, flung the paperback down. Straightened his tropical jacket.

What I did I did for my country the F.B.I. will never believe.

Locked the refrigerator in his case, stowed it under his bed. Went out, locked his door. Hesitated in the hall. Clicking still from below. No Turner. A million people, the hall empty. Sinister. Down the stairs. Into the hot marvelous street, thronging.

Scuse honourable sir me Mr. Turner you got wonder virus okay buddy this is to hell more Chinese than you could if Mary could see me

After much indecision, he picked a restaurant where he could watch the glass door of the Mukden Hotel from his table. He was the only European in the restaurant. But at least the food was good. He chose a lobster dish and drank Tuborg with it.

After, he walked up a side street. It climbed the mountain, just a series of steps. It would take only pedestrian traffic, and was crowded. Thousands of them. A jungle of small stalls. All the while, he felt uneasy. He bought an English language paper and returned to his hotel room. All was as he had left it. He put the refrigerator unit back in the shower, took a shower himself. All the time, he expected Mr. Turner to

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announce himself.

He read the newspaper.

EIGHTY DEATHS IN KAI TAK CRASH. Communist China was taking over the beggarly six square miles of Macao, Portuguese territory only a few sea miles from Hong Kong. All Portuguese leaving fast. Crashed plane had been full of Portuguese evacuees heading out of doomed colony. There were no survivors.

But Gordy how you've aged you look a million years old I've got news for you I am a million but even to me he was aged wrinkled beyond all belief even as he spoke he began to crumble that's just it I don't know how long I've got a million years but an air crash tomorrow

Tindale rattled the paper anxiously, trying to stop his thoughts.

He searched for news of the States. New president had been speaking, swearing to maintain the principles of his predecessor. Elsewhere, there was mention of the Pacific Community that the U.S.A. was busily promoting with Asiatic countries. A conference was promised in Manila at some future unspecified date.

All of which was little help to Tindale.

The continual clicking still rose from below. It still worried him, though he now realized it arose from the endless games of mah-jong being played hereabouts. After much hesitation, he phoned for room service, ordered himself a stiff whisky at a steep price, and smoked another cigar with it.

Darkness fell. He did not put on the room light. There was so much light blazing up from the street that he could almost see to read. The street was growing noisier.

A knock at the door it was Turner without so much as a knock Turner grasping my 9 mm Italian Biretta why the hell doesn't he show up it was all arranged put 'em up Tindale Turner's squealed he was killed in the air crash he must show up at the door stood a tall dapper that guy in Narvik the virus was secretly tested on human it was all agreed Mukden Turner Turner I should have got me a rod

At about ten o'clock, he went out again, this time taking the refrigerator with him, crooked under one arm and concealed by a light raincoat. Turner had not shown. He had wild ideas about getting a flight back to San Diego.

He pushed his way onto the main street and into the nearest bar.

The whisky cost even more than it had in the hotel.

If Turner doesn't arrive with the cash for a couple of days I am going to be in trouble it was all clear he would show as soon as I checked in as he opened the door

He had managed things badly. A skilled research chemist, big wheel in his firm, he had thought himself a man of the world; but his world had been too small. He hadn't even had the nerve to cash his securities in case someone got suspicious. Well, the San Diego contact had promised him loot directly he met Turner in Hong Kong. He needed Turner; he was down to his last fifty dollars.

A white man came and sat down at the table opposite Tindale. His hands trembled round his glass as if he was already drunk.

Turner's hand trembled as he clutched drunkenly at the glass he was in his late sixties a husky craggy guy blurred about the edges unhealthy blue and red tinges to his skin I'm dying he croaked heart attack in a big plane cardiac arrest even as he fell what sort of thought is that this guy

"Mind if I drink with you? This is the

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only table not packed with damned Chinese."

"Go ahead."

"The colony's going to hell in a basket. We don't rule here any more, you know. They can turn us out of here just as they turned the Portuguese out of Macao, whenever it pleases them. They're too big, we're too small, eh?"

"I don't know anything about politics. I'm an American."

He looked hard at the older man, at his silk scarf tucked in the neck of his soiled white shirt, trying to figure out if the virus was playing false with his perceptions; he had the persistent illusion he could see the guy dying.

"I'm British. I thought you Americans were always messing about in other people's politics! You may not believe this—I know I'm an old wreck now, but I was a fighter pilot in the Second World War. Yes, a hero—Battle of Britain, 1940! You weren't even thought of! Britain was great then. We stood alone, defied the world, defied Adolf Hitler. You've heard of him? Well, that was our finest hour, our absolutely finest hour. Since then—old country's finished. The whole world's going to pot, come to that."

Tindale could see that the old guy was warming to his theme. He began to drink up, but the ex-fighter pilot put a hand on his arm.

"Hang on, old boy! I'll buy you a round. Listen—not ten years after Britain's finest hour, we were finished as a world power, weren't we? I was flying at Suez—Suez, you know, when we tried to get our canal back. 1957, that was, Anthony Eden and all that. What a national disgrace that was, end of Britain's greatness! Nobody would have thought it, not in 1940. You weren't even alive then."

He drank his glass dry and stared moodily into the bottom of it. When he looked up again at Tindale, he spoke solemnly, in a more sober fashion.

"We passed on our greatness to you, you Americans, you know that? But you've lost it too. The initiative—you know what I mean, the *initiative*—has passed out of your hands following the disgrace of Vietnam, just as it did from Britain after the Suez conspiracy. We grew a conscience in the country, a sort of national conscience, in 1957. You grew the same thing. It's the end of a nation. It became more civilized, and so less able to rule."

Half-interested, Tindale said, "Who's got the greatness now, in your opinion?"

The old pilot put one veined and age-flecked hand on the table for emphasis. "In my opinion, in my opinion, the countries without conscience have the power. Number One, of course, the Chinese. Number Two—no, there is no Number Two. It would be India if she wasn't starving herself to death. There's just China, swarming over Asia. No one can match her. Terribly ruthless people."

He rose solemnly to his feet, extended a hand, made a parody of a military stance. "Captain Anthony Yarborough, once of the R.A.F., still flying in exile in his late sixties, sir."

Tindale took his hand. "I'm Gordy-Harris. I'm on vacation."

"What's that package you're hiding under your mack?"

After a pause, Tindale said, "I'm on vacation. My luggage. Could you get me a whisky? I don't feel so good."

Yarborough gave him a searching glance, and then turned and lumbered to the bar.

Then he's basically okay he knows I could slip away now so his question must

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have been casual what's that under your mack I followed you all the way from San Diego no he's British when he whirled round from the bar Turner produced an ugly-looking Biretta they grappled maybe the guy could help me he looks plenty sick but he's not as drunk as I thought at first do I need help maybe he was sent

When Yarborough came back, he set down the glasses and said, leaning forward, "Look, Mr. Harris, I've got a partner, a very fine pilot, more your age than mine. He and I are in the flying business together. Maybe we can help you, if you need help."

"What gives you that idea?"

With trembling hand, Yarborough raised his glass to drink. "Cheers! I've knocked about the world, my boy. I can smell 'em a mile off. That's how I know you've got something worth while under your coat. You cuddle it as if it was solid gold. Is it?"

"No. It's worth more than gold. Look, if you and your partner know your way around Hong Kong—I could make it worth your while to help me."

"Depends what you are peddling."

"A virus."

"A virus? Germ warfare?"

"No. Something new. This virus confers extreme longevity. Immortality, you could say."

Sheer bloody madness to blab it out I always did say you were a blabber-mouth Gordy basically we can say that a sense of insecurity

It took them half an hour to come to an agreement. Tindale was reassured to find that Yarborough and his partner, a man called Kuhnau, were engaged in some unspecified aviation business that lay outside the law; it seemed to make matters easier for, whatever the business was, it seemed to be a paying proposition. Yarborough would set one of his Chinese operators to watch the Mukden Hotel from inside, to pick up the trail of Mr. Turner, when that gentleman arrived. The erstwhile Mr. Harris, meanwhile, would not go back to the hotel; if he left again with his luggage, he would certainly alert anyone interested in his movements.

So Yarborough led them through the back of the bar and across a squalid alley and into the kitchens of a restaurant, and thus out to another street and into a taxi. They drove westwards, turning off on to a wharf fringed by gaunt concrete godowns. Among the clutter of shipping lay a small sampan; it cast off directly Yarborough and Tindale were aboard. Sliding across the dark waters, they headed for the massed lights of Kowloon, which Tindale had left only a few hours before.

Once ashore, they had another long drive by taxi. At one point, they changed taxis. Tindale had completely lost his bearings by the time they reached Yarborough's flat.

"Take it easy, old chap," Yarborough said. "Walter Kuhnau should be home soon, then we'll have a chat. I must take my anti-coagulants—old heart's playing me up. It's this damned climate. Not to mention the whisky."

He showed Tindale into a small bedroom. Tindale had picked up a few possessions from a supermarket when they changed taxis. He laid them out and looked round, staring through the venetian blinds at the lights outside. Beyond the lights, as Yarborough had carelessly indicated, lay the sullen darkness of China; one or two pinpoints of light there only emphasized the obscurity.

Asia darkness unknown whole mighty continent swarming according to the deal made that night I shall be granted you

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will be granted one hundred acres good land in southern China in the Hunan Province me on that massive continent of Asia yes you will be part of a large pleasant reservation area where there are many Americans and other nationalities who have preferred to help China in her great struggle for universal democratic principles well I don't know about that but he said later Mr. Turner will show you colour pictures of your land already it is being prepared you will have servants provided and a guaranteed income annually geared to any possible rising cost of living yes it's a bargain an income from the state for life if I am going to live for ever a single shot rang out then a permanent income is the one thing I need all they want in return is that one can of the Surviva culture it can't hurt America besides God a hundred acres and a house female servants as she came towards him a slow voluptuous smile slow voluptuous came someone in there with Yarborough as I tore auidly at her cheongsam they're shouting it's Kuhnau as he tore bestially at her cheongsam okay Tindale come out quietly I fell into this one a gun who the

As he went towards the door to listen, it opened, and Yarborough entered with a tall dark young man. The young man had sharp but heavy features. He wore a blue flying uniform, open at the neck to reveal a flamingo pink shirt underneath.

"Mr. Harris? My name is Walter Kuhnau. I am pleased to meet you." His German accent was not heavy, and he spoke with a softness in contrast to the raised voice he had been using a moment ago. "I must tell you at once that I am a strict business man—one lives no other ways in Hong Kong. If you wish our support, you must prove you can repay us for it."

He strode over to the daybed behind Tindale, swept away the cushions with one gesture, revealing the refrigerator, which he grabbed. Tindale ran forward and seized it. At once he found himself flat on the floor.

The tiger leaped up like a flash he was at the other's throat not bothering to rise he whipped out an ugly-looking laughing Kuhnau shot him dead bargain with him

"Don't be rough, Mr. Harris! Get up."

"Walter's what you'd call a tough guy, old boy. I'll get us all a drink. You'd be well advised not to look for trouble."

Climbing to his feet, Tindale said, "I'm not looking for trouble—I've got plenty of that already and, if you get involved with me, you may find rougher company than you bargained for. Ever tangled with the F.B.I. or the Red Chinese government, Herr Kuhnau?"

Kuhnau said quietly, "Yes, both of them. Look, I have trouble in plenty right now, Mr. Harris, but I can manage more if it's worth it. But you better to state your business at once, please."

Yarborough brought in the whisky.

Tindale took a good swig and sat himself on the edge of the day bed with his hands in his pockets. He said, "You are going to find this hard to believe because it's so new. You know the U.S.—and the U.S.S.R. and China, and every nation in the power struggle, I guess—are evolving new methods of bacteriological warfare. I am—was—Senior Research Chemist in a laboratory working on such a project. We finally came up with a mutated virus, J-277, now known as Surviva. It's been tested out now for over five years—that's a lot of generations for a virus. Briefly, this virus repairs all cellular damage in certain animals and fish, so that as long as the strain survives in the host body it virtually confers immortality on the host.

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I have a sample culture of that virus here—in the box you are holding."

Putting the refrigerator down, Kuhnau opened it and took out one of the phials. "Looks like plain water to me, Mr. Harris."

"Put it back! The virus lifespan outside the host body is severely limited—it doesn't have the immortality it confers on other living things."

Kuhnau put the phial back and snapped the refrigerator shut. "You tell me these viruses confer immortality on human beings."

"Only on fish and one or two reptiles."

"On fish! Who requires an immorta fish?"

"Any team of virologists with the know-how could develop another virus from the J-277 strain. My own firm has just developed one, but in limited quantities. Again to be brief, I got myself a jab of the new strain, known as Surviva-Plus, and came away fast. With the J-277 strain—the Plus virus was too well guarded to get to."

But Gordy you look a million years old it was true he had withered to an ancient dried sexless thing over night he had had a thousand years of life the whole world reveres me if it would only give me two hundred years he never looked a day over thirty and ooh that immortal body actually you're saying you're immortal the secret of eternal youth and all that if you should live that long

"How can you prove this, Mr. Harris? You realize we know it is all absolute lies, every word?"

"Okay, Kuhnau, then turn me out if you don't want a share! Look, I'll give you proof that this isn't lies. My real name is Tindale, Gordy Tindale. The hunt will be up for me in the States in a few days. I'm supposed to be away for a weekend's fishing, but they'll discover I'm missing by Monday evening. And another thing—I have to meet a contact in Hong Kong. I told Yarborough. A man named Turner. If you two will help me, I'm in a position to pay for your services."

"Wait here! We'll just have a brief discussion." Nodding curtly, Kuhnau beckoned Yarborough out of the room. He took the refrigerator with him, and shut the door. Tindale took a swig from the whisky bottle.

It'll work. His crimson shirt he fancies himself we all love ourselves need ourselves for ever without us no world they get one phial can't doublecross me because they don't know enough to take advantage of the possibilities on their own should work you operate on my terms Kuhnau or else lying in the car seat with his throat cut blood splattered over the windscreen everywhere

God where did that picture come from someone lying there in a car or could it be on a beach throat cut was it me so vivid throat all cut slit blood where do I get these thoughts could it be a vision of the future me immortal and I'm suddenly obsessed with death but in that car who me Yarborough Kuhnau Turner god not me please just lying in the dark over the steering wheel just damned rotten dead couldn't be me couldn't be

Yarborough and Kuhnau returned. "Frankly, old boy, we are very sceptical. We are going to get one of those phials analysed."

"Let me handle this, Tony! Mr. Tindale or Harris, or whatever you are called, we will give you limited help on our terms."

"I'll call the terms, thanks, Kuhnau. You listen. There are six phials in that freezer, as you saw. You and Yarborough can have one. Believe me, you could

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ransom all of Hong Kong with that one phial. But only I on the whole of this side of the Pacific have the know-how to treat that virus so that it lives and multiplies. You can have the instructions when you have got me safe to my Chinese contact with the other five phials, okay?"

"They have trouble in China—maybe Turner's dead. Then?"

"That's my worry. You see me safe, and you can have that one phial. From it, someone with special knowledge can breed the Surviva-Plus strain. With the Plus strain, you and Yarborough can live for ever and sell the rest to earn your keep for ever."

Yarborough said, "My poor old heart—I really need that stuff! My boy is already watching out for Turner at the Mukden, you know, laddie."

And Kuhnau said, looking at his watch, "I've got an appointment in forty minutes. Let's discuss details. It's a deal."

IT WAS NOT until four days later that Mr. Turner crossed their tracks.

During that period of waiting, Tindale was left mainly on his own. In the nearby bookstore, he found a copy of *Low Point X*, and so was able to find out what happened that time at Oslo. One day, Yarborough took him fishing from a motor launch in Deep Bay, indicating the coast of Red China, hinting that he and Kuhnau also had their business with the communist power.

For the rest of the time, the two men were away from the flat for many hours, once staying away overnight, to return at about noon the next day and sleep the clock round.

Once the deal was made with Kuhnau, he proved a friendly and reliable enough man, full of tales of scoundrels and harlots and big rackets all over the world, with Bangkok, Lisbon, and Frankfurt his favourite trouble spots; he claimed that Frankfurt was too hot for him to return to at present.

He came in one afternoon, flung down a newspaper full of the latest Portuguese horror stories from Macao, and sprawled in a chair.

"Any news, Walter?"

"Yes. Good news for you and good news for me, but it's best I don't tell you my news! Jackie just reports to me as I came in," Kuhnau said. Jackie was one of his many "boys" who ran errands for him in Kowloon and Hong Kong. "Your Mr. Turner showed up at last and was intercepted by one of our boys at the door of the Mukden Hotel."

"What nationality is he? Why this long delay? Are you sure it isn't some sort of a frame-up?"

Kuhnau smiled. "Relax, Gordon, you are no longer in your gangster country. The Chinese are honourable people! Mr. Turner is Chinese. He says to my boy that he was detained by internal difficulties in Peking. It's the bad political situation there, no doubt. He wishes to meet you at the city end of Deep Bay this evening at dusk."

Welcome to the Communist Republic of China Mr. Tindale of course it will be necessary for you to shave your head this is your hut no no hundred acres you pig dog only everlasting imprisonment in this hut you capitalist lackey all that your filthy American propaganda printed about our tortures is true and more to show the gratitude of Peking you may have any woman you require and a supply of paperbacks in the spy thriller and science-fictional vein he drew a revolver and fired from almost point-blank

"With the virus, of course?"

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"Not this evening. That will come tomorrow. This evening, he only wants to talk with you."

"More delay! Am I defecting or aren't I?"

"Life is full of crises. You must get used to it. This is Kowloon, old boy, not San Diego, you know."

"You hate America, don't you, Walter?"

"You hate Germany! You hate the Chinese! You hate the Vietnamese, the Negroes, the British, the Mexicans—"

"You're lying, Walter! You've never been to the States. You only know a Hollywood version. Listen, I shouldn't defend a country I'm defecting from, maybe, but okay—I'll *prove* we hate nobody, that we are and always have been the most generous nation on Earth—"

"Okay, prove, you're always proving!"

"Right—like we proved our good intentions by building up Germany again after we'd rubbed out Hitler. Listen, Walter, when my firm has got enough Surviva-Plus and has tested it out exhaustively, the U.S. government is going to give it to the world and make the world full of immortals. How do you like that?"

He opened the car door the guy was lying with an arm limp over the steering wheel his head lolled backwards over the seat he was up to his eyes in blood so damned messy and it was the picture was so clear not dear God a picture of something real to come just a little bit of fright from an ego adjusting to the bare fact of living forever but you couldn't see the face I can't see if it's who it is it's so real

"Walter, look, be a friend, I admit it, I'm scared. I've led a peaceful life—life is very pleasant and sheltered in the States, you don't realise. Come this evening, drive me there in your car, meet Mr. Turner with me, will you?"

Kuhnau looked seriously at him, clasping his hands.

Seriously I'm just jealous of the Americans seriously you're just a little bastard I like you Gordy Gordon

"He had instructions I didn't tell you yet, Gordon. Mr. Turner told my boy that you were to pick up a Self-Drive Happy Yellow Car from the station down the road here—he knows where you shack up, you see. You are to drive to the beach alone. There is not to be anyone else, and you are to leave the car by the end of the promenade and walk along the beach to the deserted part, keeping near the sea always."

Very pleased to meet you at last Mr. Tindale and welcome in the name of please don't think of yourself as a traitor we have useful chemical research for you to do in Peking preparing lethal bacteria to be dispersed in America as he came along the shore towards me I drew my gun throat slit from ear

"Yes, I see. Walter, you're flying illegally in some way, aren't you? Something to do with Macao? I don't want to know. But one day, you and Tony might be in difficulties. I'd have a bolt-hole in China for you; you'd be welcome, that's God's truth. Just be a friend this evening—get down on the beach first. I've seen your armoury while I've been hanging around here. That rifle with telescopic sights—keep me covered, just in case."

"In case what?"

As the yellow man flung himself forward there was a puff of smoke up the beach dark a shot rang out from the direction of the dunes he staggered

"You know. In case there's any trouble. And tomorrow night, when they actually

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take me over the border."

"Sorry, Tony and I won't be around this part of the world tomorrow."

"Just this evening then?"

"The phial this evening, then?"

"When we get back here after the meeting you shall have it."

"I drink to that, my friend!"

"And Tony?"

"He's lying down to rest. We have a busy night ahead of us, apart from your little sideshow."

They drank, looking thoughtfully at each other.

Ear to ear.

WHERE THE STREET lights gave out, he stopped the Happy Yellow self-drive car and walked across the track to stare along the beach. The tail of the South China Sea lashed feebly against the ancient shore. Beyond the bay lay the Chinese mainland, fold on fold of featureless hills.

And suddenly my heart said to me be still the magical sagacity of all sensation even as he spoke

He had his directions. He walked across a rattling shell ridge down on to the beach and trudged across the dry stretches of sand to make himself a moving target by the line of waves. To the west, something of the day still left a stain in the sky; from another direction, the concealed lights of Hong Kong set up a redder glow; but it was too dim to see much. Tindale stared at the low dunes. Walter Kuhnau was somewhere along there, concealed but peering along the infra-red sights of his rifle, sitting tight in a car awaiting Tindale's troubles.

Someone was coming diagonally across the beach towards Tindale.

He stood where he was and the man walked right up to him.

"You are Gordon Tindale?"

"Mr. Turner?"

"Good, you got my instructions. Walk with me down the beach, Mr. Tindale. I will not take much of your time."

Possible in the dimness to see that he was a well-built Chinese, wearing some sort of a tunic buttoning high round the throat. A flat face, ugly cheekbones. Easy movements, very good English, inhuman. They walked, away from the lights and the yellow car.

"I have the package, Mr. Turner. You kept me waiting. It is urgent that the package is delivered as soon as possible. I want to cross into China tonight if possible."

"Delay was unavoidable. There were some administrative delays, much regretted on our part. But everything must be done correctly. If we know you are happy to join us, we will take you across to your new home tomorrow night."

"Why not tonight?"

"I cannot answer all your questions, I regret to say."

They've got their endless complicated troubles too maybe Turner's 'dead this guy's some phoney so saying he produced a nasty-looking gun from under his I can hold out another day it's not too bad suppose he's just one of Walter's men Walter planned it all never watched anyone at the hotel just framing me perfectly possible oh God I must be sure was a way to check I've never told Walter or Tony name of my firm

"I need your credentials, Mr. Turner. Give me proof that you represent the Peking government. What is the name of my former employers in San Diego?"

"I will show you credentials in car. Also, your firm is Statechem Inc of Chula Vista, San Diego. Now, kindly

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accompany me. You came here entirely alone?"

They left the pounding waves behind, walking across the sand, Tindale keeping to seaward to avoid any possible shots from the land side. Behind the dunes was a track, leading to a couple of fishermen's villages which perched almost at the frontier. It seemed very dark on the track. Tindale almost fell against Turner's car before he was aware of it. As they climbed in, he saw that another man stood shadowy by the front of the car; he muttered a few words to Turner as the latter climbed in to the driver's seat.

They're going to murder me blood all over the windshield and throat cut from ear I struggled violently VIRUS THIEF FOUND STABBED Mary I did love you these bastard Chinese

"I do not have the virus here, you understand."

"That is understood, Mr. Tindale. We offer you no harm. We offer you sanctuary, away from the insane pressures of your society. We are building for a better world in which all will fairly play their part. China has no evil intentions; she wishes only to see global justice done. The war-mongering imperialistic forces of the world must be extinguished, and this will happen very soon."

As he spoke in his calm flat voice, Turner was producing a small slide projector, which he plugged into the car instrument panel.

"See here, pictures of the estate you will be given, in beautiful Kwangsi Chuan Region."

"I was told it would be in Hunan Province."

"Is more beautiful in Kwangsi Chuan Autonomous Region, and more prosperous."

He stared into the viewer. There were diagrams as well as actual photographs. The place looked good. The building itself was a simple ranch-type affair with only three rooms and bathroom, kitchen, and toilet, but these offices were well-equipped. Outside, the view was stupendous, with mossy and hunch-backed hills parading like camels along the landscape. One shot of the ranch in particular had a poster-like quality, with a black water buffalo dragging a plow against a background of the fantastic hills, the tops of which were bled away into cloud.

As the slides shuttled before Tindale's vision, Turner's voice went on, ". . . very secure place in the coming struggle. Safe alike from hydrogen bombs and invading armies. 'The army and the people are an ocean in which the invader must drown,' as the immortal Mao has said. Those who work for us are rewarded—"

"What are you going to do with Surviva-Plus when you have it?"

"That need not concern you, Mr. Tindale. But clearly we shall use it to extend the working life of our leaders, so that they can serve the people forever."

"The people aren't going to get it, you mean?"

"That will not be possible for some while."

There were workers with smiling faces among the slides, and paddy fields, some terraced, and a winding river, punctuated by a small boat with a sail. And horror. Tindale was catching, almost subliminally, glimpses of a prison cell from which a devil's face mouthed at him. His heart thudded.

It'll burst are the virus doing their stuff or are they killing me I have a mental sickness my ego breaking free from the

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fear of death a machine to keep my heart beating built-in cardiac pace-maker there's the prison again all metal barred two guards rushed in as they grappled kicks screamed his thighs punch in the like oozing raspberry jam the clouds low there like an old painting

He slowed the slide mechanism as the last picture came up, saw that the subliminal illusion was a glimpse of the back of the projector, barred in metal, on which a crude portrait of the Leader had been stamped. His alarm stayed with him.

Foreign devils

"If you like all you see, Mr. Tindale, please be back here alone tomorrow at the same time. With the virus."

The man outside tapped sharply on the window. Turner opened the door. Noise of engines out there, a sweep of light. Turner jumped out. The track suddenly visible in sweeping searchlight, and immediately a police hover appearing over the low rise. Turner grabbing machine gun from car and flinging himself down, firing upwards. Another hover, a loud hailer, metallic voice in Chinese, then in English, "Stay where you are, George Harris, stay where you are, George Harris!"

George Harris running like mad down the track, Turner and buddy firing madly but not at him.

Doubled up, searching the tattered grass skyline to the right. *Car there Walter Kuhnau good guy make fast getaway forget all this terror* Among the dunes, Kuhnau would be waiting, as anxious to avoid police as Tindale. *Really seeing excitement like Oslo hero at last there it is* Smooth cab shape just off the track and he ran to it. glitter from sea and sky showing Kuhnau inside. *Why not started engine Walter Walter* Flings open door. *Ear to ear they got him it was Walter in the premonition thank God not me oh Walter that other bastard got to you I Christ I all my blood everywhere now what turn him out of course go like hell be brave Walter you so foul dead Nazi bastarding Chinks ah ah out you go and the sand lay cool without footstep a knife flashed and without a sound just leave him there my pants all over my hands like stain of crime bloody engine won't oh boy they got their hands full with Turner foreign devils among the camels over punishment hut get to old Yarborough and always rely on the British he'll get me out I got to do it got to do it seventy seventy-five steady for God's don't hit anything a cart at the last moment he still firing back Walter Walter you poor I'm going to make it Harris Harris they know I'm*

He was back among the lighted streets, forced himself to slow down, passed a taxi garage, took first left, stopped the car and got out, ran back on foot, took a taxi back to Yarborough's and Kuhnau's flat.

Yarborough was asleep. Tindale shook him.

"I'm too ill to go, Wally. Not tonight—Gordon, what the dickens? I thought it was a scramble!"

"They're on to us, Tony. We've got to get away."

Breathlessly, he explained what had happened. As he talked, Yarborough sat up, spilled five pills into his palm from three different bottles at his bedside, swigged them down with a quarter of a tumbler of neat whisky, and rose. He started dressing.

"Get your virus, Gordon. I told Walter this was dangerous. We are leaving here. I'm in charge now."

"What are we going to do?"

"The virus is my property. If I sell some

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of it well, you get a share. I shall be fair, never fear. In exchange, I will get you out of this hole. All of Kowloon will be screaming for you, and they'll be on to you in no time. It so happens you have a real streak of Yankee luck. Walter and I were going to make an unscheduled flight tonight to a safer part of the world. You can come with me. We're getting right out of here."

"Where to?"

"You'll see."

Mm certainly looks pretty cool back in 1940 about to take a bang at the Luftwaffe no doubt fast dresser better be what now money we certainly need it his secret drawer

"Here's a passport. No, British, you'll never pass for English with that accent. Canadian, ah, good, I knew we'd need it one fine day. You're David Watkins. Memorise the details."

He caught the Canadian passport Yarborough threw him. He was David Wilson Watkins of Ontario, aged forty-five. Square-headed, open-faced. All extremely unlikely. He picked up the refrigerator. Yarborough was stuffing money and a whisky bottle into a case. He ran through to the kitchen, came back with a kerosene can, sprinkled it over the bed he had just left, brought out his lighter.

"What are you doing, man?"

A cock-eyed smile. "Don't think I don't wince to do it, old boy, but we must destroy the evidence—and this may create a bit of a diversion."

The bed was burning merrily as they made for the elevator. The events of the next three hours remained blurred. Yarborough was entirely in command, and it was evident he had a great many contacts locally. He took Tindale to a bleak office full of Chinese; three of these men escorted them to a warehouse; from there, they rode in the back of a furniture van to some unknown stretch of town and transferred to a fast car which had been crudely bullet-proofed inside with sheets of metal. They drove out of the built-up area.

Eventually, they emerged on a headland overlooking the sea.

It could have been Deep Bay again, for all Tindale knew. All was quiet. Two Chinese with carbines slung over their shoulders accompanied them down a flight of wooden steps to the narrow beach. The four of them stood there in silence. A ship was patrolling out in the bay, its searchlight swinging round in leisurely circles. Suddenly, a small craft appeared off-shore. Yarborough and Tindale waded out to it, leaving the guards on the beach.

They climbed in to a small submarine. The one-man crew was already supine at the controls; they had to crouch beside him. Yarborough muttered a few words of Cantonese and they started to move.

Too small nonsense too small sinking keep calm claustrophobia the heat and death again that head lolling back another death not Walter it's me next time oh shut up it's Tony Yarborough it's all nonsense you just need a we are going across to China after all he's double-crossing me

"Tony, you're taking me to China. I swear I'll break the phials if you double-cross me!"

"Relax, old chap! We're going across to China, but I have a working arrangement with them. Even among political enemies, all sorts of personal arrangements are possible—I'm useful to the Chinese. But I'm not handing you over to them, if that's what you think. This mob here I deal with won't have

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heard of you—you're a top secret Peking project, evidently. We'll be okay, never fear!"

At one point, they cut the engine. In the almost complete silence, the wash of the tide could be heard beyond the hull, a few inches away.

"What the hell'd he stop for?"

"Keep quiet!"

The silence seemed to have extended for ever before they got under way again. Yarborough explained that a patrol vessel was moving overhead. After that, it was only a few minutes before they cut engines again and touched against the further shore.

"Don't drop that blasted refrigerator pack," Yarborough said, as they climbed out into the surf. He gave a low whistle, which was answered.

Tindale looked round. On the other side of the bay, lights were flashing.

Cliffs rose steeply here. A man in an oilskin carrying a dim lantern came to guide them up a twisting path. It was hard work climbing to the top; then the guide was for pressing on, but Yarborough stopped him and leaned on Tindale.

"Oh, that's bad for my heart! I must retire from this active life. I'm not what I was in 1940, that's for sure—would never pass for AI now."

"You're doing fine, Tony—now let's get on!"

They followed the guide over dark cliffs, clutching each other and stumbling. Once they passed a hut before which two men in uniform stood, but no word was spoken. They came to a rutted track, which met a road after a couple of hundred yards. There, a car was waiting for them, with uniformed driver.

"This is the road to Canton," Yarborough said casually.

Millions of people jostling shops stalls junks Canton this is China prehistoric tawny ancient loud as a gong with tilled dust all-embracing feared home-made steel running in the paddy trenches every fourth one gentle and cruel camel humps marching across yellopen landscape the parchment screen so green the army and the people are an ocean nothing could stop me now with my associate I jumped into the gleaming black limousine and drove towards the forbidden city of the army and the peasants are an ocean in which the invaders will drowsetung

After several miles of dim-lit progress, they turned off the road and were bumping over an inferior road.

The two white men sat in the rear of the car. Yarborough came out of a stupor and said, "Right, old boy, here we are at the airfield; you are my co-pilot, David Watkins, okay? Directly we get in the plane, we both go forward and stay tight. They won't be suspicious. I'm a bit early, but it's ten-fifteen now and we take off shortly after one ack emma. I'll catch a nap before we take off. It's going to be a strain without Walter. You don't fly, do you?"

"Where are we flying to, Tony?"

"Hang on, old boy!" The car had stopped before a bright-lit concrete hut. They climbed out and, at Yarborough's prompting, checked in. The Chinese officials looked at them with dislike and kept them waiting for ten minutes before they were free to go.

They walked across a badly paved square. Outside one low building, a line of silent people huddled.

"Who are they?"

"Portuguese."

Beyond, the scene began to look more like an airport. A large airliner stood close at hand, fuel tenders clustering under its wings; lights glared round it, revealing

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blue-clad Chinese technicians.

"That's my plane. An old Tupolev Bear, damned fine machine. The Chinese have converted it into passenger-freight—it was designed as a bomber. I did the deal for them with some Russians. Walter and I part-own it. We fly it places where it wouldn't do for Chinese to be seen." He looked quizzically at Tindale. "You don't know the world, old boy, but you'll learn. The peoples of the nations have to live together, whatever the politicians say. Let's get a bite to eat, and then we'll go aboard."

Once you step over an invisible line old boy you belong to no country know no allegiance from that moment on every man's hand was against a big plane like that would never get over the surrounding hills piddling little cookhouse those massive steaks she and I used to eat at that place smells good Tony man of world me I fly anywhere learn get a pilot's Indonesia hopping equator foreign devils boy that chicken better big guy

He found a Bering in his cigar case and smoked it after the meal, strolled with it nonchalantly in a corner of his mouth as they crossed to the Tupolev. *Gordy Tindale was one of the dare-devilest guys you ever* "Don't tell me, Tony—better put it out with all this fuel around, eh?" *Right from the start of the game he never missed*

"That's old hat—you've been watching old movies. You could throw your cigar right into this juice: it's non-inflammable."

They climbed up the ramp. Inside, the big plane echoed. It looked enormous. There was cocoanut matting laid in the central gangway, and straw palliasses on either side.

As they walked through the gangway, Yarborough said, "They stripped her of all her armaments and put in extra fuel tanks. She'll fly just about anywhere in the world. I've carried almost three hundred people on short flips, but tonight we'll only have about a hundred and fifty."

"Portuguese?"

"Of course. They pay six hundred quid sterling for the ride. I get a quarter."

In the control cabin, more palliasses were spread. Yarborough looked at his watch and sank down gratefully. He spread himself out and was asleep almost at once.

Tindale went and sat in one of the pilot's seats, staring at the panels of dials all round. With the lights on in the cabin, he could see nothing outside. He sat there, running over the madness of the day. The cigar butt fell from his hand. He also slept.

When he woke, Yarborough was taking a swig of whisky and looking about. In the body of the plane, the Portuguese refugees were assembling, most of them men, plump, tired, towsled, middle-aged; there were a few women and five small children. All were very subdued. As they took their places on the uninviting palliasses, a Chinese officer in a grey uniform pressed through the crowd and came forward. He shook hands cordially with Yarborough and Tindale and talked to the former in Chinese.

"They want us to get away as soon as possible," Yarborough said. "You take that seat, Gordon. It should be an easy flight. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying."

"Sorry, no offense meant, but we shall be taking the polar route." He strapped on his headset, opened up the radio, and began to talk to ground control.

Now they were flying through a blinding white haze suddenly Tindale

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shouted I must not live dangerously must not centuries wasted death he's getting us ready to go polar route the starboard engine cut out God

The four turboprops were waking to life. The overhead lights went out. The Portuguese were all in position now; the exit was closed, the ramp retracted. The air-conditioning came on. Unexpectedly, beautifully, the guide lights woke outside, amber and green and red, into the far distance down the field. The fuel tenders were already moving away. The Tupolev stood alone.

Polar route which godamned pole old Tony'll never make it his heart but TRAITOR HERO Tindale brought the gigantic Russian oh grow up man this is for real I don't even know where we're going I just that deal was no good never trust the Chinks lousy Reds I'll screw a better deal out of you have to hand it knows his polar routes to him my finest wow we really

They were rolling into position. Five minutes later, the lights were lurching below them and the dark hills rolling. Then the hills were gone and the lights, and they were circling, climbing. Yarborough raised his thumb, smiled. In a while, he pointed to a distant blaze of light. Hong Kong. Still burning bravely on the edge of the greatest continent. Then it was snuffed.

When they had settled down to routine, Tindale said, "You never told me where we were heading."

"Portugal. Outside Lisbon, about fifty kilometres—Caldas da Rainha Field."

"Lisbon! How far's that? Can we make it?"

"I've done it half a dozen times. The reports from the weather satellites are all good. I'll switch to automatic presently; then we can get in some more kip."

"But how far is it?" He was annoyed to see that Yarborough enjoyed being nonchalant.

"Oh, about eight-and-a-half thousand miles, the route we go, right over China and Russia. They route us this way so that most of the time we're over Communist territory or the sea. We're at 36,000 feet, making something like Mach point six eight. It's about nineteen or twenty hours in the air, allowing for winds and one thing and another."

Mary I still love you I was immature I want you back we can live somewhere safe take a thousand years get to know each other properly maybe really understand ourselves some island paradise Fiji

THERE WAS A Chinese steward on the plane. He brought them a thin but tasty pork soup with noodles. Tindale and Yarborough had been silent for a long while. Finally, the latter said, "I'm not used to thinking ahead, Gordon. Living forever—you can't take it in, can you? I shall miss Walter, but we can use his contacts. We'll shed these Portuguese chaps and then perhaps we fade into the blue, forget about the plane, bless it. Go to Frankfurt. I know a chap called Schaefer there—he'll see we get a ransom for the virus. The Germans will pay up. They're a pretty straight nation, despite the occasional bastard like Goebbels and Hitler. I really hated Goebbels."

"I don't see why the Chinese show such interest in the welfare of the Portuguese. Aren't they turning them out of Macao?"

"The Chinese are a strange race. They detest the rest of the world, and yet are fascinated by it. They want their fingers in every pie. They don't give a hoot for the Portuguese—who would?—but they find it useful to have a flight going into Europe like this. Among the passengers will be a

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couple of Red spies, for certain."

"You don't mind?"

"Why should I care? Every nation spies. It's a neurosis. The ordinary men like you and me go on living."

You think yourself ordinary you big ugly lump of outdated figure of fun wonderman tough guy callous as all I think you care less about Walter's death than I ear to ear he was a good first German I ever met I all my life has suddenly turned extraordinary entire break with I Frankfurt all glass offices the fine Rhine wine

They slept. When Tindale awoke, dawn was there, marvellous, and again he saw a symbol that immortality had taken him beyond the ordinary world of men. He looked at the chart on which Yarborough had marked their flight path. They would enter the Arctic Circle but not touch the pole; at the northern point of the Yamal Peninsula in Siberia, they would change course and fly down the Baltic Sea and high over Europe to Portugal. *Now am I lost from the States and from my normal dying life place and time* The hours passed. *He had hours to spare* The Portuguese kids had got over their scare and were running about in the aircraft. *Hours to spare I was immortal as a kid perhaps it's time I woke up to the world got time* Yarborough went to swill his blotchy face in the toilet at the rear, and Tindale was alone above the clouds. *Got enough time to look after other people beside myself those kids even Tony to hell with him old limey drunk* Siberia lay hidden below. *Come to terms maybe really just being born ordinary men got to get myself born anything's possible*

Yarborough returned. He seemed to be staggering a little.

"Tony, I need to get to a place where I can just sit and think for maybe several years. I haven't used half my potential. A man's so busy scraping his living, and when that's over—well, you're too old for anything. Being immortal's going to sort of change the viewpoint and—"

"I don't feel good, Gordon."

"Take a pill. You drink too much! I read somewhere once that a scientist said man was just a species that never grew up. Maybe immortality is needed to reach adulthood. Sort of scarey to think—I mean, everyone's going to be immortal one day."

"Gordon! I—" Yarborough took a step forward, lurched, and fell slowly forward, sliding down the pilot's seat on to the floor. Harsh noises came from his throat, his eyelids fluttered.

"Oh, no!" Tindale grabbed the older man and pulled his head up. "You can't get ill now, Tony, come on. Where are those pills?"

Yarborough's face was distorted. He pointed to his palliasse. Scrabbling, Tindale found three bottles, pulled off the caps, rolled out pills.

"Water, water, Gordon, quick . . ."

He ran to the steward at the rear of the plane, pushing the Portuguese out of the way, so that some of them came back anxiously with him and stared in the door as he gave Yarborough the number of pills directed, slopping water down the man's throat and over his face, which was pale now under the stubble.

"Keep out, you guys!"

"I am a physician, sir—" one of the passengers said, venturing forward.

"Keep out—he's going to be okay. It's just a bad hangover!"

Bastard got to live got to damned live wish I had Surviva-Plus might kill the old guy in this stupid state flying through blinding haze he pulled the bomber out of a long dive got to live all lives were lost

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After a while, Yarborough was well enough to move. Tindale propped him so that he was lying fairly comfortably on the straw mattresses.

"Sorry to scare you, old boy."

"We'll get you into a hospital in Lisbon."

"It's time we were changing course. I'll direct you. Get into that seat and switch off the autopilot and I'll direct you."

"I can't!" *Example of supreme heroism onlookers agreed*

He looked at Yarborough, shrugged, and climbed into the seat.

THE HOURS PASSED. The great Tupolev flew on unfalteringly under inexpert guidance.

As they were drinking another round of the chicken noodle soup, Tindale said, "You know, I'd decided against closing the Chinese deal Turner offered me even before the Hong Kong police came and broke it up. Do you know what decided me? Maybe you'll think me stupid. I was getting a sort of subliminal warning off his slide-projector. Back of that nice little ranch-house, and those picturesque mountains and the lazy old winding river and rich landscape—back of all that, lay a prison, presided over by an evil spirit."

Yarborough was breathing heavily, slumped in the co-pilot's seat. "You'll see one day—all life's like that. Wherever you are, old boy—it's a damned prison, presided over by evil spirits. You'll understand when you get older."

"I'm not going to get older, Tony."

"And you'll see that the prison is of your own making. And you're your own devil. Behind every beautiful landscape I've ever seen lurks prison bars and you ought to ask yourself before you get too old like me—whether you are going to be locked in with the others or locked outside the way I was locked out—unable to feel anything or take any pleasure or hope . . ."

"Tony! Tony!" He jumped up, throwing off his headset.

Yarborough's voice had died, a strangled look came onto his face. He fought a silent enemy, his hands curling before his face. His mouth open; a low stuttering sound, almost like a foreign language, came from it.

"Your pills, Tony!"

"Injection . . . Now . . . Life—Surviva—only chance . . ."

They had clocked almost sixteen hours flying time, and were six-and-a-half miles above the Baltic Sea. *Got to make Lisbon almost there old fool going to die on me all down in ocean swim ashore unknown man Chinese agent*

"Now, Gordy—Surviva . . ."

Maybe injection might help him give him him extra time got to get safe retreat need Yarborough Frankfurt Deutschmark crackle smiling clothes but would it be safe give him Surviva just don't know told him and Kuhnau I was Senior Research Chemist not just office dogsbody just don't know about these things this Surviva only works on things like fish guess no harm in trying

The situation was urgent.

Yarborough was making a terrible noise now, a broken knocking. There was no longer any suspicion that he could be shamming to get a quick injection. In panic, Tindale ran for the locker where he had stowed the refrigerator *pack' death doubly terrible now locked out plan's going crazy Christ I asked the cocksucking spill his veins* He dropped the pack and grovelled on the floor for it. A hypodermic syringe was included in the case. He filled it clumsily from one of the phials, aware the plane was plunging

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WALK OF THE MIDNIGHT DEMON

Gerard Conway made his debut in last month's issue of our sister magazine, AMAZING STORIES, with a grim tour-de-force of near tomorrow. Here he turns to older, more elemental times, when men walked the land hand in hand with fear and death . . .

GERARD F. CONWAY

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

"GODS!"

I turned in my saddle, looked back through the misty twilight; Illusiah hunched forward over the neck of his beast, clasping a hand tightly to his stomach. Scarlet flowed freely through his fingers, a dark black scar marring the material of his tunic. I reined about, came up to him. He turned a face pale with pain up to me.

"Can you ride?"

"No . . . no further."

He grunted as agony sliced through his middle, sagging as a shudder rippled through him. Groaning, he slid forward, gripping his mount's mane, twining his fingers in the flaxen hair for support as his body shook again, and again. I touched his arm.

"We must go on. Already the moon rides the horizon."

I glanced back: an ashen glow glared through the clouds of dusk grey, framed between twin peaks of the Kakgnar Pass. We'd ridden through that pass only three days before—already it seemed like an eternity gone. Much had happened in the crossing of the death plain; much needed forgetting, from now, and Before: but here trembled Illusiah, and there could be no balm for the memory.

"I die. I die, Haxx. Make him pay . . . make the demon *pay*." He croaked the words out between grimacing lips. I gripped his arm tightly, firmly.

"Nonsense—it's only a few miles further to the druid wood. You can ride, and there we'll find you a witchment to salve your wounds."

He looked up at me—his eyes were red-rimmed, swollen in agony. He blinked, as a faint smile crept over his lips. His laugh was hollow, mirthless. "Lying helps me little, Haxx." His face tensed; he moaned, "All I have left are your lies . . ."

He went limp, slid down off the beast as I released his arm, watched him fall into the dust. He lay sprawled, the gaping wound where once his belly had been still leaking a flow of blood—then it stopped, and he was dead, and I was alone on the death plain.

He'd been right. In the end, all he'd had were my lies. But what could you tell a dead man? Only lies . . .

I leaned out of my saddle, took up his mount's reins. In a day, perhaps two with rationing, the food I carried would run

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out, and a walking meal would be sorely welcomed.

I rode away from the place of death.

And the memory came.

A scent of dry smoke curled about us as we sat before the ancient crone, a bent, wrinkled mass of cracked and seamed flesh, a sack of tired bones bound in tattered rags. She moaned something over the fire, in a half-voice whisper just beyond the range of our hearing. I looked about to see how the others were reacting: Illusiah stared into the flickering flames, absorbed with a gaze of intensity that came easily to him. Tar leaned back against a decaying log, watching the old woman with a skeptical glare. I turned my attention back to the witch. Of my own feelings, I knew nothing—there was a void in my middle where my emotions were held—I felt empty now, completely open. The witch-woman's monotonous drone seemed to weave gently in my mind, building a path of shadow-images in my brain. I listened, I watched—and was drained.

At length she looked up at us, her coal-black crow's eyes dancing about in a face of chalkish age, obsidian flame against ice marble. She seemed so much more *alive* than any other women I'd ever known; perhaps it was her age. They say age brings wisdom. Perhaps it also brings life. The eyes moved about, settling finally on me, lancing with searing force into my soul. "You," she breathed, softly, "You shall be the first."

I nodded hesitantly.

Taking out a deck of cards from under the coarse brown material of her dress, cards kept bright and glistening by some half-magic process known only to her, she shuffled through them, selected a card painted with the picture of a knight atop

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a dark horse, holding a carefully-balanced star-in-circle. Under the picture, the legend read: Knight of Pentacles. "Black hair, dark eyes. For you, the Knight."

Placing the card before her, she held the deck out to me. "Mix them."

I did. She continued, "Think of the question—think of that you most deeply desire to know. Only thus will the Tarot speak true and deep."

My life—what is happening to the three of us? Death—does it follow? Where are we? Why? When does it come? How?

"Now cut the pack in three—to your left," she commanded when I finished shuffling. I complied, using my left hand. She retrieved the deck, held it for a moment, and then she turned up the top card, placing it across the Knight. "This covers him."

It was a dark card, a scene of horror and sorrow—a nightmare sequence of silent terror. A man lay facing away from us, and thus was all men, and from his back there grew ten swords, plunged deep into his flesh. Without understanding, I shuddered.

"You will have many burdens to bear—you will suffer ruin, pain, and you will have many tears. Sorrow covers you."

She studied the card for a moment, then turned up the next card off the top of the deck. The legend read: *The High Priestess.* The old woman looked startled. "This crosses him," she hissed, "There are secret forces hidden from our eyes, a mystery at work upon you . . . what opposes you is unseen, unrevealed. Here there is only silence."

I stared at her: she refused to meet my eyes, but started to take the next card off the top of the deck . . .

And after this, another memory: from a time Before:

An odor of ale greeted us as we moved into the inn yard; mixed with the smell of brew came wafting the hot taste of roasted meat, of fresh bread and pleasing sweetmeats. But I was uncaring, listening with only half an ear to my companion's harsh jokes, the peals of laughter from those around us. Tonight we were to visit the witch-woman, and perhaps discover what meaning there was in the deaths of those behind us, the plague of sin that appeared to trail us from village to village, township to township. Yet I remembered the last killing, so redly branded upon my thoughts, the stink of fresh blood from torn flesh, a ripped, mangled body. What was it which followed us—why did Death touch the path we rode?

Tar prodded my side. "Why so glum, Haxx? This evening, at least, let us keep our faces smiling, our bodies pleased, if not our souls."

I tried a grin; it felt thick and unreal on my face, like a masque. "The body is weary, Tar," I admitted, "as the ride has taken the soul from me. But the words are true—if die we must, then must we laugh."

He frowned. "Death is a harsh word, my friend. A word little liked in a place such as this, at a time like this. But come," he laughed, clamping a hand to my shoulder, "Let us lose our woes in wine, if only for the present. Time enough for dark thoughts when later we visit the witch." He chuckled dryly, "A true old crone, this one, they say. Not a flouncy lass like the ones to the north."

"You think perhaps she'll be of more help than those?"

He grimaced.

"I think she'll be of little help, friend, as all of them. The others saw the Death we carry scab-like with us, and they could

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do naught but mumble prayers and spells—useless. This one reads cards. What difference? It comes to nothing. What can she do? What can any of them do?"

"Perhaps show us our souls."

He peered at me through the darkness and eye-stinging smoke. "You believe in this, don't you? You truly believe."

I looked away from him. "Each man has his beliefs. I have mine. It keeps me sane."

He studied me for a moment, shrugged. "Your own way then. I find solace in drink, my friend. If nowhere else. A man may still betray you, but rum cannot . . . you always know what to expect from him."

He reached out, caught a serving wench about the waist, pulled her in to him. "Aye, lass?"

And the passing of time, and another memory:

Underneath, the matting crinkled against my skin, cutting my flesh. I twisted, rolled, seeking a more comfortable position. There was none. The straw bedding was a nightmare of thorns. I reached out for the girl I'd chosen for the night, found only a scrap of thickly woven cloth. Awake immediately, I sat up, looking about at the naked beams, the slice of black shadow, the open window with a single faded curtain fluttering out towards a view of thatched rooftops and midnight sky. The small room was empty; the girl was gone.

I was puzzling this when something clattered outside the door in the hall beyond: footsteps, soft leather against dry wood. The door pushed open, and a figure stood framed in the rectangle of crimson light from a torch set low on the far wall.

"Haxx? Gods, man—hurry!"

"Who—"

The shadow slid into the room, gripped my arm. In the light from the window, I recognized Illusiah's drawn features. A light of fear glowed in his eyes.

"Illusiah, what's happening? Where—"

"We must leave this town. Tar's waiting with the horses. You must hurry, Haxx. There isn't much time."

I groped for my breeches, found them under a length of cotton skirt. "What's wrong? I don't—"

"For the gods' sake, hurry!"

I fumbled with the pants, pulled them on, found my tunic. Illusiah pulled on my arm, sent me towards the door. I stumbled, picked up my boots, hopped about on one foot as I pulled the leather wrappings on, tied them with the bands of hide. "Will you tell me—"

"A girl's been found dead—and there are others. Somehow the word's been spread about us . . . how Death seems to walk with us . . . follow us . . . gods, man, are you lame?"

"Ready." I pulled on my tunic as we hurried out of the room, lacing it as we rushed down a flight of ancient stairs that creaked and snapped under our weight. I was remembering the old witch, her reading, the implications in the cards she'd shown me earlier that evening. I'd been trying to tuck it away, silence it with an evening's pleasure. But it came back, and still I struggled for understanding—

We ran out into the cool night air. Tar swung around, cursed at me. I mumbled something in reply, clambered up onto my mount. Without another word, we rode out into the darkness.

And again, the memory:

She laid down the last card. The fire, crackling in a crimson dance, was the only sound in the clearing: no birds cried,

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not an animal stirred, the very wind was still-born. Tar sat transfixed, caught up by the fascination of the Tarot. Illusiah remained silent, staring. I watched the old woman's face: it was tight, bound by some inner tension, taunt with a tinge of—fear?

The cards were set in a cross, with a line of four cards to the right.

The last of these cards was "Death."

Her voice barely broke the surface of calm, the silent pool of frozen time that held us all bound like unwilling slaves, "I can read no more. You must all leave me. All of you . . . must go."

She began to pick up the cards, one at a time, slowly, deliberately. Illusiah touched her. "But the last card—the culmination of all the others. What does it mean?"

Black eyes. Fierce, cool. Flaming black crimson. Watching, yet not.

"For the last card, the divination must be that of the subject, the Knight. Black hair, dark eyes. A mystery of silent forces. Look ye, see thy soul."

Tapping a card with a cracked, aged finger of twisted wood. "Seventh . . . the fears you hold. Five of swords. You fear defeat . . . a conquest within, and yet without. A matter resolved—but against you. This you fear."

Alabaster, glazed stone, running rivers of ancient cracks, gnarled treestump white of face. Darting cold fireeyes. "But this. The hopes, the desires. This. The *ninth* of swords."

She held it out to me, and, gods, I took it. In golden colors, a woman in grief, horror grief, bent with fear, sorrow, and nine swords suspended, waiting above.

Dark sensation.

"Your hopes, desires . . . doubt, misery. *Death.*"

"But what does it mean?"

Silence, aching long, waiting, pregnant, filled. She stared at me, and I died a bit. Then: "Many swords, many cards of court. Conflict within, to be resolved by that which is Without. This I do not understand, nor should I. It is yours. More than this . . ."

She stopped, and time swam forward again. Briskly now, she retrieved the remaining cards. "I can say no more. Now you will all leave."

Many memories now, of time Before:

A sheep meadow, a winter's night, as cold wind ate my face, cutting into the lines and creases, beating at the week's growth of beard stubbling my jaw. I called out again, but the wind tore the call from me, sent it shrieking, fading, dying across the field. Stalks of yellowed grass, waiting dead for winter's end, rippled in silent waves, like cresting water rolling back upon a shore, pounding without foam. I pushed into the wind. Far to my right, a shadow shifted against the grey clouds. I called out.

"Taaaaaarrrrrrrrrr!"

Turning, the figure looked around, at me, towards me. Perhaps I imagined the call, faint, lost in return; but the figure moved, waved me towards him. I called out again, in answer, and started forward. My foot struck something soft and yielding when I was only a few yards from Tar . . .

It was a body.

Or rather, what was left of it.

Whom it was, I'll never know . . . for it had no head . . .

Nightmare rain of sticky wetness running little rivers of muddy grey down slick cobblestones, slick with wet, once slick with red, now running rivers, and I

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ran, ran from what I saw, oh, gods, what I saw, lying limp, lying dead, so dead, lying there lost in the alley. That which I saw. Not now, not alive, never alive, oh, gods, it'd been alive, alive and breathing once, alive and warm, and living, warm, cool blood, who? Who'd done it? Why, why, death god, why? Demons. A woman. Oh, gods, once it'd been a *woman* . . .

Beasts moaned a moon-song around us, crying to the stars, crying for their souls. Death smelled evil in the air. I threw another stick on the small blaze we'd kindled, searched the encroaching darkness for sign of movement. The darkness was still. Above, a wisp of cloud covered the moon, black spilling down from the starless sky, dripping in long shadow fingers creeping along in grey streaks about the ground. I shivered, but not from the cold. I'd wakened to a screeching cry of pain, of dying anguish, from something . . . in-human. Illusiah slept silently beside me. Tar was gone.

A rustle moved the underbrush behind me. I swung about, groping at my side for the knife, remembering I'd placed it under the saddlebag—and then the brush parted, and Tar stepped through, holding a mass of grey hair and wet flesh. He dropped it by the fire, looked at me.

"Perhaps Illusiah is right," he grated, "perhaps the Death-spectre does stalk us. Look . . . a wolf, twice the size of any dog. Look at its throat."

I bent forward, stared at the animal, caught in the scarlet flickering of the campfire, strangely sallow.

Its neck was a crimson gash.

The memories passed, and I rode . . .

Night fell away behind me, purple shadows fading in dusky yellow-red light, and the sun grew into a blistering sore overhead, a festering glare of pain fanned by a dry wind. I sweated deeply, rills of salt rivering down the inside of my tunic, along my back and chest. The soft leather itched against my skin, and after a time I stripped it off, riding barechested then into the noonday sun.

I'd lied to Illusiah. The druid wood was many miles ahead, more than three day's journey before me. I'd lied to him, and he'd known, but it mattered little. A dying man needs lies, to give him the strength to die. Wasn't that the way of heroes in the legends? Dying for justice, a name, a mere concept. These thoughts ran through my mind as my skull burned under the blaze overhead. There were many other thoughts, but always the path circled back to Illusiah, sprawled dead in the sand, and then to Tar, to Tar, who disappeared the second night away from the village. The night Illusiah was struck by a midnight demon, struck while sleeping, while I slept. I remembered the horror of waking to his moans . . .

Tar. Why had he gone? And where—where did he go, in the middle of the night? Where *could* he go, midst all this heat and sand . . . and to what end?

Or had the night demon claimed *him*, body *and* soul?

My suspicions grew. I remembered now all the times when he'd disappeared with Death, when his very presence heralded dying. Could it have been Tar, all along? Then what of the Tarot, and the message the witch-woman claimed was mine to decipher?

I called up the last card, forming the image of the skeleton Knight riding a white horse, riding against a crimson background. What could it mean—did it foretell my death? All men die, and such is the end of any venture into life. What

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then? What did the card *mean?*

I rode all day towards the black line of forest that stretched across the far horizon. When night fell, I made camp, starting a small blaze to warm me against the ice chill of the desert after sunset—and also as protection against the scavengers who roamed the plains after dark.

After a time of watching of clouds cover and uncover the pinpoint stars overhead, after a time of thought about the meaning of silent, mysterious things, things hidden in myself, things hidden without, I drifted off into a fitful sleep . . .

. . . and woke towards dawn to the touch of cold metal against my throat.

"Tar!"

"Yes, friend." Tar's voice was harsh, tense. "You thought I'd gone, left you forever?"

"It *was* you all along, wasn't it?"

"Me? Hardly." He squatted down beside me. "Haven't you puzzled it out yet, Haxx? The answer's there—secreted in the tale the Tarot told. Mayhap you still seek to keep the truth from yourself? Aye, I'd see it so. It fits with all I've come to think . . ."

"What means this?"

"We were fools, Illusiah and I," he went on, absently, as though talking to himself, or to some unseen companion, but certainly not to me. Past him, I could see his stallion pawing nervously at the ground, and next to it, my own chalk mount snorting and steaming. I looked back at Tar. "Fools we were not to have seen it. But truly, how could we know? How could the outsiders see what the inside had yet to admit?"

"You ramble. Speak your mind clearly, Tar."

"Ahh, but I am. That I am. There are tales, friend, Haxx, tales of demon things sent by the Death God. Surely you've heard them? But of course, we all listened to them as children." He shook his head, rubbed a weary hand along the line of his brow. "I've been riding since two days anon. The mind wanders." He focused on me with difficulty. "Illusiah . . . is he dead?"

"As you say it, fiend." His words troubled me . . . but I knew him now for what he was. Filth.

"I? The fiend? But I forget . . . you do not know. That is the way of it, then?" I watched him carefully, waiting for a slight slip of his guard . . .

"Aye, aye. The tales—of the Death God sending one of His own to bring Him souls. The souls of the dead. Animals, women, children, men. But more horrible than this, is his plan." Tar blinked at me groggily. "For he takes one soul for his own—and uses it, without its knowledge. Uses it, for the most foul things. Oh, gods . . ."

His head fell forward against his chest. He was babbling madness. I inched forward, but his hand shot up, steadied the blade under my chin. He glared at me with eyes lit by insanity.

"I've suspected for a long time, but was never sure, until the Tarot. Death God's messenger—the Tarot. Do you know what "Death" means? Transformation and destruction. Destruction and transformation. Death . . . but change. A rebirth."

"But why tell me this?"

"Because there's a chance," he hissed, leaning forward, eyes mad now, totally mad. Something snapped in my mind, a fire lit itself in my breast. "A chance you can be saved. If only through death, a form of life—" his words became a scream as he stared at me, a scream that bubbled in his mouth as I leaped, sinking my teeth

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BEEN A LONG, LONG TIME

R. A. LAFFERTY

You've heard the one about the monkeys, the typewriter, and the complete works of Shakespeare? So did Michael . . . but he set out to prove it—!

IT DOESN'T END with one—it *Begins* with a whimper.

It was a sundering Dawn—Incandescence to which all later lights are less than candles—Heat to which the heat of all later suns is but a burnt-out match—the Polarities that set up the tension forever.

And in the middle was a whimper, just as was felt the first jerk that indicated that time had begun.

The two Challenges stood taller than the radius of the space that was being born; and one weak creature, Boshel, stood in the middle, too craven to accept either challenge.

"Uh, how long you fellows going to be gone?" Boshel snuffled.

The Creative Event was the Revolt rending the Void in two. The two sides formed, opposing Nations of Lightning split above the steep chasm. Two Champions had it out with a bitterness that has never passed—Michael wrapped in white fire—and Helel swollen with black and purple blaze. And their followers with them. It has been put into allegory as Acceptance and Rejection, and as Good and Evil; but in the Beginning there was the Polarity by which the universes are sustained.

Between them, like a pigmy, stood Boshel alone in whimpering hesitation.

"Get the primordial metal out of it if you're coming with us," Helel growled like cracked thunder as he led his followers off in a fury to form a new settlement.

"Uh, you guys going to be back before night?" Boshel whimpered.

"Oh, get to Hell out of here," Michael roared.

"Keep the little oaf!" Helel snorted. "He hasn't enough brimstone in him to set fire to an outhouse."

The two great hosts separated, and Boshel was left alone in the void. He was still standing there when there was a second little jerk and time began in earnest, bursting the pod into a shower of sparks that traveled and grew. He was still standing there when the sparks acquired form and spin; and he stood there yet when life began to appear on the soot specks thrown off from the sparks. He stood there quite a long, long time.

"What are we going to do with the little bugger?" an underling asked Michael. "We can't have him fouling up the landscape forever."

"I'll go ask," said Mike, and he did.

But Michael was told that the responsibility was his; that Boshel would

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have to be punished for his hesitancy; and that it was up to Michael to select the suitable punishment and see that it was carried out.

"You know, he made time itself stutter at the start," Mike told the underling. "He set up a random that affected everything. It's got to be a punishment with something to do with time."

"You got any ideas?" the underling asked.

"I'll think of something," Michael said.

Quite a while after this, Michael was thumbing through a book one afternoon at a news-stand in Los Angeles.

"It says here," Michael intoned, "that if six monkeys were set down to six typewriters and typed for a long enough time, they would type all the words of Shakespeare exactly. Time is something we've got plenty of. Let's try it, Kitabel, and see how long it takes."

"What's a monkey, Michael?"

"I don't know."

"What's a typewriter?"

"I don't know."

"What's a Shakespeare, Mike?"

"Anybody can ask questions, Kitabel. Get the things together and let's get the project started."

"It sounds like a lengthy project. Who will oversee it?"

"Boshel. It's a natural for him. It will teach him patience and a sense of order, and impress on him the majesty of time. It's exactly the punishment I've been looking for."

They got the things together and turned them over to Boshel.

"As soon as the project is finished, Bosh, your period of waiting will be over. Then you can join the group and enjoy yourself with the rest of us."

"Well, it's better than standing here doing nothing," Boshel said. "It'd go faster if I could educate the monkeys and let them copy it."

"No, the typing has to be random, Bosh. It was you who introduced the random factor into the universe. So, suffer for it."

"Any particular edition the copy has to correspond to?"

"The 'Blackstone Readers' Edition Thirty-Seven and a half Volumes in One that I have here in my hand will do fine," Michael said. "I've had a talk with the monkeys, and they're willing to stick with it. It took me eighty thousand years just to get them where they could talk, but that's nothing when we're talking about time."

"Man, are we ever talking about Time!" Boshel moaned.

"I made a deal with the monkeys. They will be immune to fatigue and boredom. I cannot promise the same for you."

"Uh, Michael, since it may be quite a while, I wonder if I could have some sort of clock to keep track of how fast things are going."

So Michael made him a clock. It was a cube of dressed stone measuring a parsec on each edge.

"You don't have to wind it, you don't have to do a thing to it, Bosh," Michael explained. "A small bird will come every millennium and sharpen its beak on this stone. You can tell the passing of time by the diminishing of the stone. It's a good clock, and it has only one moving part, the bird. I will not guarantee that your project will be finished by the time the entire stone is worn away, but you will be able to tell that time has passed."

"It's better than nothing," Boshel said, "but it's going to be a drag. I think this concept of time is a little Mediaeval, though."

"So am I," Michael said. "I tell you

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what I can do, though, Bosh. I can chain you to that stone and have another large bird dive-bomb you and gouge out hunks of your liver. That was in a story in another book on that news-stand."

"You slay me, Mike. That won't be necessary. I'll pass the time somehow."

Boshel set the monkeys to work. They were conditioned to punch the typewriters at random. Within a short period of time (as the Larger Creatures count time) the monkeys had produced whole Shakespearian words: 'Let' which is found in scene two of act one of Richard III; 'Go' which is in scene two of act two of Julius Caesar; and 'Be' which occurs in the very first scene and act of the Tempest. Boshel was greatly encouraged.

Some time after this, one of the monkeys produced two Shakespearian words in succession. By this time, the home world of Shakespeare (which was also the home world of the news-stand in Los Angeles where was born a great idea) was long out of business.

After another while, the monkeys had done whole phrases. By then, quite a bit of time had run out.

The trouble with that little bird is that its beak did not seem to need much sharpening when it did come once every thousand years. Boshel discovered that Michael had played a dirty seraphic trick on him and had been feeding the bird entirely on bland custard. The bird would take two or three light swipes at the stone, and then be off for another thousand years. Yet, after no more than a thousand visitations, there was an unmistakable scratch on the stone. It was a hopeful sign.

Boshel began to see that the thing could be done. A monkey—and not the most brilliant of them—finally produced a whole sentence: "What say'st thou, bully-rook?" And at that very moment another thing happened. It was surprising to Boshel, for it was the first time he had ever seen it. But he would see it milliards of times before it was finished.

A speck of cosmic dust, on the far outreaches of space, met another speck. This should not have been unusual; specks were always meeting specks. But this case was different. Each speck—in the opposite direction—had been the outmost in the whole cosmos. You can't get farther apart than that. The speck (a teeming conglomerate of peopled worlds) looked at the other speck with eyes and instruments, and saw its own eyes and instruments looking back at it. What the speck saw was itself. The cosmic tetra-dimensionate sphere had been completed. The first speck had met itself coming from the other direction, and space had been transversed.

Then it all collapsed.

The stars went out, one by one, and billion by billion. Nightmares of falling! All the darkened orbs and oblates fell down into the void that was all bottom. There was nothing left but one tight pod in the void, and a few out of context things like Michael and his associates, and Boshel and his monkeys.

Boshel had a moment of unease: he had become used to the appearance of the expanding universe. But he need not have been uneasy. It began all over again.

A few billion centuries ticked by silently. Once more, the pod burst into a shower of sparks that traveled and grew. They acquired form and spin, and life appeared again on the soot specks thrown off from those sparks.

This happened again and again. Each cycle seemed damnably long while it was happening; but in retrospect, the cycles were only like a light blinking on and off.

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And in the Longer Retrospect, they were like a high-frequency alternator, producing a dizzy number of such cycles every over-second, and continuing for tumbling ages. Yet Boshel was becoming bored. There was just no other word for it.

When only a few billion cosmic cycles had been completed, there was a gash in the clock-rock that you could hide a horse in. The little bird made very many journeys back to sharpen its beak. And Pithekos Pete, the most rapid of the monkeys, had now random-written the Tempest, complete and perfect. They shook hands all around, monkeys and angel. It was something of a moment.

The moment did not last. Pete, instead of pecking at furious random to produce the rest of the plays, wrote his own improved version of the Tempest. Boshel was furious.

"But it's better, Bosh," Pete protested. "And I have some ideas about stage-craft that will really set this thing up."

"Of course it's better! We don't want them better. We want them just the same. Can't you monkeys realize that we are working out a problem of random probabilities? Oh, you clunker-heads!"

"Let me have that damned book for a month, Bosh, and I'll copy the plagued things off and we'll be finished," Pithekos Pete suggested.

"Rules, you lunk-heads, rules!" Boshel grated out. "We have to abide by the rules. You know that isn't allowed, and besides it would be found out. I have reason to suspect, and it cuts me to say this, that one of my own monkeys and associates here present is an informer. We'd never get by with it."

After the brief misunderstanding, things went better. The monkeys stayed with their task. And after a number of cycles expressed by nine followed by zeros in pica type sufficient to stretch around the universe at a period just prior to its collapse (the radius and the circumference of the ultimate sphere are, of course, the same), the first complete version was ready.

It was faulty, of course, and it had to be rejected. But there were less than thirty thousand errors in it; it presaged great things to come, and ultimate triumph.

Later (People, was it ever later!) they had it quite close. By the time that the gash in the clock-rock would hold a medium-sized solar system, they had a version with only five errors.

"It will come," Boshel said. "It will come in time. And time is the one thing we have plenty of."

Later—much, much later—they seemed to have it perfect; and by this time, the bird had worn away nearly a fifth of the bulk of the great stone with its millennial visits.

Michael himself read the version and could find no error. This was not conclusive, of course, for Michael was an impatient and hurried reader. Three readings were required for verification, but never was hope so high.

It passed the second reading, by a much more careful angel, and was pronounced letter-perfect. But it was later at night when that reader had finished it, and he may have gotten a little careless at the end.

And it passed the third reading, through all the thirty-seven plays of it, and into the poems at the end. This was Kitabel, the scribing angel himself, who was appointed to that third reading. He was just about to sign the certification when he paused.

"There is something sticking in my mind," he said, and he shook his head to clear it. "There is something like an echo

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THE NEW RAPPACINI

BARRY MALZBERG

In his column this issue, Alexei Panshin suggests a new coinage for those works which extend beyond the commonly accepted boundaries of science fiction: Creative Fantasy. And herewith, a remarkable short-short which is just that.

I

CAREFULLY, lovingly reconstructing his wife Glover has a sudden intimation of fright, at the moment that he applies the generating spark to the corpus it will lift from the sheets, lean toward him on a propped elbow and with a tone of perfect, level accusation say: *it doesn't make any difference, no difference at all, I still hate you, it was all a lie, the whole thing was a lie from the beginning and you should have let me sleep* and nailed by this somewhere between remorse and fulfillment he will stand frozen forever, unable to cut the power, unable to deal with the resurrection. But along with so much else he has put this out of his mind; the thing to do is to get her walking and talking again and then they will work it out from there. He busies himself with the organizer, the synthesizer, the power grids, the cellulose acetate blender, the entire intricate apparatus which would be an object of amazement to him if it was not purchased on credit and tries to keep in mind only one thing: when he is done she will come toward him with mingled gratitude and knowledge in her eyes and he will do nothing but stand for a long time and hold her, the breathing spaces of her body, the opening crevice of her necessity under his and past that there are no thoughts at all, only the old tattered admixture of dream, anticipation, loss and revulsion which seized him from the onset of this mad decision.

II

UNDER him in bed (he chose to remember) she had been gentle and ferocious by turns, pulsing with his body, muttering words into his ear, telling fragments of her history to him as he yanked himself toward orgasm; a good wife, a cooperative partner, a hint of scatology in her own devices which had matched some devilish stroke of prurience in his own nature or was it only perversity which had guided him in those nights, nothing else. It was very hard to remember, all of this receding from him; the point was that she was the most important thing in the world to him by virtue of permanence if nothing else and thus he had taken her death very hard, the more so because, when you came right down to it, it was all very inconsequential. Perhaps he had never needed a wife in the first place, only something accessible and socially approved to masturbate against but there

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was no time for that kind of consideration now, what he wanted to do was to put her together again, reconstruct her with the Kit which would surely be adequate if he were only careful and patient and mixed the materials well. The instructions had been very positive, almost cheerful in their tone. *You will be thrilled by the renewed energy of your relative.* Only this, only this he wanted: that when she was free from it and activated she would come slowly toward him, her eyes merging mystery and madness in the old merry light and she would say, "why you old bawd, you old son of a bitch, I didn't know that you cared that much, what a surprise, what a pleasant surprise, why I'm just tickled to death." It didn't seem too much to ask but, of course, he had long since resigned himself to the fact that even in this simplest of relationships there were no easy answers.

III

PUTTING the last filaments together, within three or four hours of completion according to the booklet, Glover has an idea: he will improve upon the original model. There is no reason why he cannot; the booklet, of course, is slanted toward reconstruction—this is an amateur's piece of equipment—but on his own he can suspect innovations, adjustments, possibilities. Whistling in the depths of his basement laboratory he widens her nipples, extends the droop of her breast by some two or three inches, imparts an arch to her eyebrow which he believes will, in nightheat, inflame him like a swordsman. Also, he makes certain modifications on the cerebral cortex, induces some subtle acids into the thalmus which will improve her intellectual potential by, perhaps, some 20%, not enough, not enough—she was never a very bright woman—but a beginning. He thinks as well of doing something to the pelvic muscles to tighten her vagina but decides against this: it would be sheer weakness and, in the bargain, would impart to his almost sacramental set of tasks an overlay of self-indulgence which he cannot accept; he is not reconstructing his wife for a better fuck but only because he loved her deeply. This he assures himself, singing a Hebraic chant in an odd, off-key tenor, the creaking of his voice moving at some bizarre off-angle to the high boards under which he works, the sound of his solemnity working toward the very heavens or at least some facsimile of them he hopes he hopes, he surely hopes.

IV

IT had been a peculiar accident, having something to do with a twisted ankle, an object on the steps, a wrong angle of bones and joints, a slow slide, a sickening fall, poor luck, who knows? He had found her that way when he came home, her face perfectly white, stretched taut like an eggshell, seemingly pasted, from that angle, against the deader white of the ceiling and his first surge had been one of remorse because he was not absolutely sure that in some mad corner he had not plotted out all of this, even to the angle of the patella when it missed stride, flung her outwards, but he put that out of his mind immediately, only leaning, gathering her in his arms, raising her, putting his lips against her fine, dead neck. "Don't worry about a thing," he had said to her, "don't worry about a thing, I'll get a kit and make it up to you.

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I'll prove to you that it wasn't my own fault, it wasn't anyone's fault, it only just happened." And indeed he would not be willing to swear, even at this penultimate moment, that his prime motivation for all of this madness, all of this unalterable work has been not love, not grief, not remorse, but only the slender, raving, wholly insane voice of reason, talking levelly in a small room somewhere, trying to establish that there is no culpability to be understood and therefore no history, never any history, not even possibility; no, there are other things, other things with which he must be concerned he is not sure that he is feeling very well.

V

PAUSING before the moment of activation in the stillness of his cellar Glover has a dream: in his dream his wife awakens and rises, turns toward him in an opening fullness like a flower, the cords of her neck distended like vines and says, "you son of a bitch, it was only vanity, vanity and technology that drove you through this, if it had been for me I would have left me sleep, let me sleep the sleep of the damned or just but nothing else, not between, never, I tell you that technology alone can never keep us from meeting our ends but can only cloak them in dread and waste," and then, with a perfect solemnity, perfect grace, perfect control, she will lean back on the table, close off the switch and for the final time, the irrevocable instance, she will die and he will awaken but to the colors of what he knows he will never understand.

—Barry N. Malzberg

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that is not quite right. I wouldn't want to make a mistake."

He had written 'Kitab—', but he had not finished his signature.

"I won't be able to sleep tonight if I don't think of it," he complained. "It wasn't in the plays; I know that they were perfect. It was something in the poems—quite near the end—some dissonance. Either the bard wrote a remarkably malapropos line, or there was an error in the transcription that my eye overlooked but my ear remembered. I acknowledge that I was sleepy near the end."

"Oh, by all the worlds that were ever made, sign!" pleaded Boshel.

"You have waited this long, a moment more won't kill you, Bosh."

"Don't bet on it, Kit. I'm about to blow, I tell you."

But Kitabel went back and he found it—a verse in the Phoenix and the Turtle:

'From this session interdict
Every fowl of tyrant wing,
Save the eagle, feather'd king:
Keep the obsequy so strict.'

That is what the book itself said. And what Pithekos Pete had written was nearly, but not quite, the same thing:

'From this session interdict
Every fowl of tyrant wingg,
ave the eaggle, feather'd kingg:
Dam machine the g is sticked.'

And if you never saw an angel cry, words cannot describe to you the show that Boshel put on then.

They are still at it tonight, typing away at random, for that last sad near-victory was less than a million billion cycles ago. And only a moment ago—half way back in the present cycle—one of the monkeys put together no less than nine Shakespearian words in a row.

There is still hope. And the bird has now worn the rock down to about half its bulk.

—R.A. Lafferty

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This is Ova Hamlet's third appearance in these pages, and this time she has fixed her sights upon an American target. As her keeper, Richard Lupoff, explains it, "Ova was over the other evening, and during the course of that evening, she chanced upon a book which contained Harlan Ellison's 'Shattered Like a Glass Goblin.' Inevitably, she read the story, and erupted into a cacaphony of sounds, the meaning of which I found impossible to decipher. The next day the following story arrived in my mailbox." Lupoff also notes that he is incorporating this story, like her last, into his near-legendary novel, Sacred Locomotive Flies. *Some of us are wondering how.*

BATTERED LIKE A BRASS BIPPY

OVA HAMLET

As told to Richard A. Lupoff

Illustrated by MICHAEL KALUTA

SO IT WAS that after two years that Pasky found her—in that clean and green-lawned split-level up on a hill near Poughkeepsie. Living with them all, not just with Fenton. Oh, it was just horrid.

It was April in Dutchess County, the sky a sparkling clear blue tufted with tiny puffy white clouds while a balmy zephyr ruffled his curly hair. Pasky shifted his old canvas suitcase from his right hand to his left, strode up the slate-gray and rust-red flagstone path to the front door, and rang the doorbell. As he did so he noticed a tasteful American flag decal clinging to the small pane of glass in the door.

After a few minutes which Pasky spent breathing the clean, fresh air of upstate New York, nervously rubbing his unshaven chin and wondering if it was too late to slick down his unruly hair, the door was opened. Before him stood a woman of indefinite age, probably around thirty-five Pasky guessed. She wore a pink terry-cloth housecoat and light green mules with sea-urchin-shaped pompons. Her short, henna-yellow hair was trapped in a miniature maze of gold-colored plastic curlers.

"Yes?" She said, opening the door a few inches and sticking her face into the opening at an oblique angle.

"Uh, is Ali here?" Pasky said.

"Well, maybe she is and maybe she isn't. Who's lookin' for her and what do you want?"

"My name is Pascal Pascudniak,"

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Pasky told her. "Alicia Ashkenazi used to go to my school back in Endicott, and when I was off serving my nation in the *United States Coast and Geodetic Survey* Mrs. Ashkenazi sent me a postcard and said that Ali had gone to live with the Farnsworth family."

"Hmmm," Mrs. Farnsworth intoned. "Sounds all right to me. Well, young man, come ahead in and I'll see if Alicia wants to talk to you." She seated him on a flowered couch and departed up a short flight of stairs, casting a disapproving sniff over one shoulder at his dye- and bleach-patterned T-shirt, his tight jeans and low boots.

In a few minutes *she* appeared at the top of the stairs. Alicia Ashkenazi.

"Ali" cried Pascal. He leaped to his feet and bounded to the foot of the stairs.

"Hello, Pascal," said Alicia coolly. "I thought they expected coast and geodetic surveyers to keep themselves a little neater than that."

Pasky looked down at himself in confusion. "I . . . I'm sorry, Ali. I've been travelling for three days and I haven't had a chance to—"

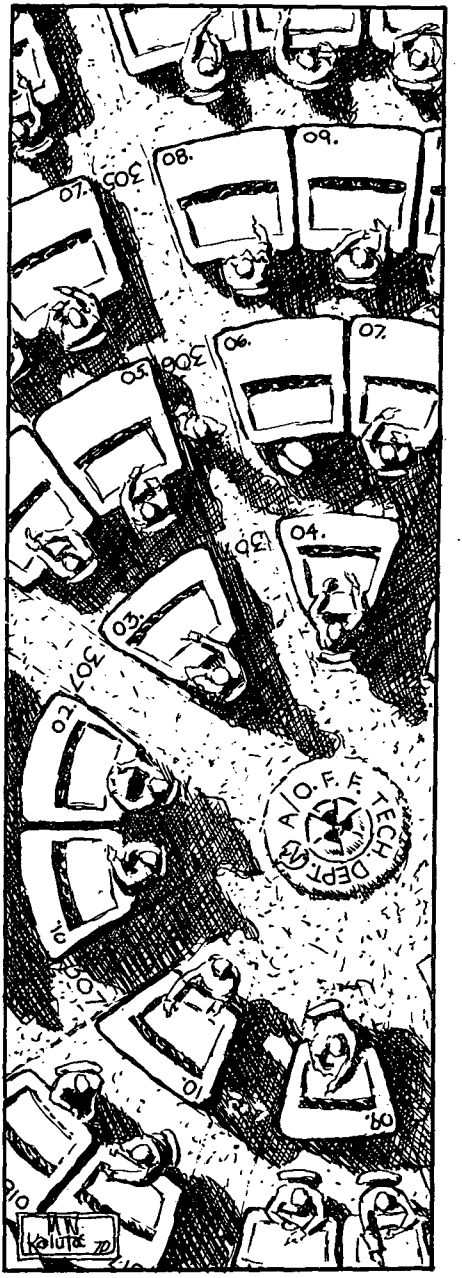
"It's all right," she cut him off. "I'm sure you'll clean yourself up as soon as you find a room to stay in. Then I suppose you'll come back."

"Well, Ali, in fact I was kind of hoping that, uh—"

"That what?" It was Mrs. Farnsworth, who had reappeared over Ali's shoulder.

"Oh," said Ali, "you haven't been introduced at all properly. Ferne, this is Pascal Pascudniak. Pasky, Ferne Farnsworth. Mr. Farnsworth is at work at the computer factory and the girls, Felicia and Fillippa, are at school."

"Uh, we've met, Ali, thank you. What I was going to say, though, uh, do you think the two of us could speak privately?"



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Mrs. Farnsworth looked disapprovingly but Pascal and Alicia went into the kitchen and Pascal closed the door. Alicia reached back and opened it a crack. Pascal said "Ali, are you serious about living with these people? I thought we were going to get a place in the city and have a good time together. What's all this suburbia business?"

"I've changed, Pasky. The Farnsworths give me a clean room and food just for being a mother's helper. Ferne is my friend and Fenton is very kind to me even though he pinches sometimes. I just threaten to tell Ferne and he behaves himself."

"What about me?"

"What *about* you, Pascal? What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Well, I thought that once I got out of the Survey I could really live a little, you know, get a cheap pad, we could move in together, have some fun, maybe find ourselves a little. Then let the future just kind of develop, you know."

"I do know, Pasky. I've found myself with this fine family. Fenton drives a Camaro to work and Ferne has a big Mercury station wagon in the garage. She has two fur coats and a whole box of jewels. They eat in fine restaurants and drink good liquor and he has a very brilliant future ahead of him at the computer factory.

"Why, just last month he was promoted from manager of monolithic exclusive and/or flip-flop chip technology manufacture to manager of the *whole* and/or flip-flop technology department. He has two other managers reporting to him now and he makes $20,000 a year!"

"But—but—" Pascal stammered.

"And Felicia and Fillippa both take ballet lessons and piano lessons and they're members of the junior sodality and they're in the junior play at the Taplingers Falls Senior High School and they *both* have fur stoles and Fenton had his three Corporate Manufacturing Appreciation Awards made in diamond-dust brooches for Ferne, Felicia and Fillippa!"

Pascal rose from the table and pushed the door open. Mrs. Farnsworth stood outside it, her head turned so that one ear was close to the kitchen. "Mrs. Farnsworth," Pascal demanded, "what would you say if I told you I was taking Ali away from here, with me?"

"Why, she's a big girl, Mr. Pascudniak," wrinkling her nose and sniffing slightly as she pronounced his name. "If she gets a letter from her parents, it's her own business what she does." Peering into the kitchen she added "Isn't that right, dear?"

Alicia looked up, smiling broadly. "Couldn't we let Pascal have my room?" she asked. "I really wouldn't mind moving in with Felicia and Fillippa. It would be fun, almost like a girls' dorm!"

"Well," said Mrs. Farnsworth, "I suppose it *might* be all right. I'll just ask Fenton when he gets home tonight. Meanwhile I'm sure Fenton wouldn't mind if Mr. Pascudniak"—sniff—"used his razor this one time. Do be certain to wash carefully *before* you shave, won't you, Mr. Pascudniak?"

So Pascal moved in with the Farnsworth family. Felicia and Fillippa arrived home late in the afternoon, complaining bitterly of having to ride home on the school bus when so many of their friends had cars of their own. Mrs. Farnsworth introduced Pascal to them and they mumbled surly greetings, holding their lips curiously stiff as they spoke to him.

The girls quickly disappeared in the

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family room from which the voice of Tom Jones was heard almost immediately, roaring out the lyric of Hello Young Lovers Wherever You Are. Pascal turned to Ali and asked why Felicia and Fillippa had held their mouths so strangely as they spoke to him.

"They didn't want you to see their braces!" she replied.

From the family room there was a momentary pause in the music as one LP track ended and the needle moved silently to the next band. In the silence the voices of Fillippa and Felicia were audible, squealing.

"Ugh! Did you see that long, greasy hair on him? I'll bet he hasn't been to the barber shop in *weeks!*"

"And those horrid clothes! What does he think he is, a farmer or something?"

"Is he really the creep Ali used to think was so neat?"

"What do you think daddy will say when he sees him?"

"I bet he'll make him take a good bath, that's what! And then—"

With a rush of violins Tom Jones launched into I Can't Stop Loving You and the rest of the conversation was lost beneath his lush Welsh baritone voice and twenty-piece orchestral accompaniment.

In the living room Pascal sat nervously on the edge of a large easy chair, knitting and unknitting his fingers as he watched Ali idly turn the pages of *Good Housekeeping*. At one point she seemed almost to chuckle and Pascal eagerly asked what she had read of such interest.

"It's Dr. Joyce Brothers' column," she said. "But, umm . . ." She closed the magazine. "It has to do with dealing with men. I don't think you'd really be interested in it at all."

He reached for the magazine but she tucked it under the cushion of the couch where she was sitting and refused to move again.

"Hey, come on Ali!"

"No, it was really just some recipes."

"Well, I'm interested in food."

"It was fashions."

He gave up.

At dinner that night Mr. Farnsworth seemed preoccupied. "You've been getting home later than ever since your promotion," his wife said to him.

"I know. All the paperwork. Price of success. Wouldn't want me to go back to first line, would you, Ferne? 'Course not. Used to get home by seven, eight o'clock then, but when you get up in the world the responsibilities increase. Have to be last out, you know, keep tabs on men, set an example."

"Uh, Fenton," said Pascal, "you don't mind if I call you Fenton, do you?"

"Course not. Informality very helpful. Aids communication. Useful management tool. What is it, boy?"

"Well, uh, I've been wondering if this is your whole life. I mean, don't you ever get tired of this routine? Isn't there anything else?"

Farnsworth burst into peals of laughter. He cackled and guffawed. After minutes he looked coldly at Pascal. "Sorry I laughed. Course you're right, boy. Listen, last winter went to management conference in Schenectady. All expenses paid. No wives." He winked at Pascal, then turned away. "Par'm me a moment. Ferne, I'm still hungry. Put another TV dinner in the oven for me, will you, this one is nearly gone!"

He belched. "Had a couple of wild times in Albany, boy, I could tell you a thing or two. Listen, not fit for mixed company." He nodded slyly at Felicia and Fillippa who were arguing over a bowl

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of quick-thawed citrus cobbler. "Just cool it. Afterwards I'll show you my playroom. I keep my golf clubs there, *e-heheheh!*"

And after dinner Fenton guided Pascal downstairs to a cedar-veneer panelled room with a lock on the door. As he opened the lock Fenton said "Confidentially, nobody else has key to this. Would be a little more convenient to let the wife in to clean up, but I don't want her noseying around in here. Come on, want to show you something, just us men."

Inside the room Fenton turned and locked the door behind them. Pascal turned around as concealed fluorescent lights blinked on. "Have a good look," he heard Farnsworth say. The walls of the room were covered with foldouts clipped from girly magazines. Pascal turned and turned, and wherever he turned he was confronted by breasts, buttocks, smiling salacious faces, long seductive hair, women on beds, women on rugs, women posed nude in front of fireplaces, women posed nude on the hoods of sports cars, nipples, thighs, mouths smiling invitations, pink tongues exposed enticingly, soft arms extended eagerly, smooth legs open invitingly.

Pascal turned at a sound behind him and saw Fenton emerging from a huge walk-in closet. He was garbed in the black-and-silver costume of a World War II SS officer, a skull-and-crossbones German military cap set rakishly on his head. In one hand he held a long, stiff, rodlike riding crop. In the other was a bottle of whiskey. "Go ahead," he said to Pasky, "step into the wardrobe and pick something that appeals to you. I have police uniforms, tight leather and rubber, scuba, an aviator's suit complete with helmet and goggles, cowboy clothes with high boots, everything!"

"Uh, no thank you, sir," said Pasky, "I think I'll just keep on my own clothes."

"Well, then, at least have a drink with me and then I can show you my private photo collection."

"Well, I don't really drink very much. Most of my friends and I, we don't go in much for liquor any more. We, uh—" From the family room came the loud tones of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass playing Girl Talk.

Pascal heard Ferne's voice loudly cutting through the fuzzy trumpets. "Will you brats turn that thing off for once! You know I wait all week to see Englebert Humperdinck and I want to hear him too!"

"But mother, if that's all you want we can put on an LP and you can hear him sing all you want."

"It's not the same thing and you know it. Now turn off that hi-fi!"

Back in the playroom, Fenton had reached into his German uniform trousers pocket and pulled out another key with which he unlocked a gray enamelled box taken from a shelf in the walk-in closet. He opened the lid and began shuffling black-and-white photographic enlargements. "Would be a little reluctant to send these out for commercial photo-finishing," he said. "Took 'em myself and have a friend over in the photo services department. Slip him a fifth of scotch once in a while and he does my developing for me. Discreet fella. Met him down at the county Conservative Party meeting. Go hunting together sometimes, but we have to be discreet about that too. Good man but not a member of management. Sorry case."

He showed Pascal a photo of Felicia. It was dark and the focus was fuzzy. She was lying on her back on a bedspread with

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tiny ballerinas embroidered on it. She was naked. She had his gestapo riding crop in her hand and was dandling herself with it. Her other hand was extended toward the camera with a finger crooked in invitation to join her among the ballerinas.

Next photo showed Fillippa. She was sitting on a toilet, apparently unaware of the camera. (Was it aimed through a concealed peephole? Pascal looked at Fenton. Fenton looked at Pascal.) Fillippa was reading a copy of The Love Machine. Her expression was extremely intent.

"Hey boy, you look pale," Fenton expostulated. "Better have a drink after all!" From somewhere he produced a tumbler and filled it halfway with amber fluid. Pascal downed it at a gulp, the fire in the back of his mouth distracting his mind from the pictures.

Fenton showed him photos of Felicia and Fillippa together, then of Ferne, finally of himself in a variety of poses with his wife and daughters singly and in various combinations. "Taken by my friend," he explained. "Discreet fellow. Too bad he never made management. Sad."

Pascal took another big drink. From the family room he could hear the 24-inch chromaspec color TV spewing loud commercials. A young female voice overrode the loudspeaker with "Now Englebert Humperdinck is over, can I put on my new Glen Campbell record?"

Another voice: "Absolutely not! It's time for Doris Day and her guest star is Debbie Reynolds tonight! Don't you dare—"

Two shrieks of feminine anguish followed by loud stompings going upstairs.

"Alicia, you'll just have to do something with those two girls. I get so little relaxation around here, I have to get what small pleasures I can!"

"Say, you really like that Ali, don't you boy?" Fenton had been matching Pascal drink for drink, and was slumped against a wall, his black-and-silver uniform picking up dust from the color pin-ups. He extended the bottle and refilled Pascal's glass.

Pascal downed the drink. His mouth no longer burned but a warm feeling was radiating from his stomach to every part of his body. "Yeh, Fent, you know I really loved her. Before I went into the Coast and Geodetic Survey we decided we were gonna fuck the establishment and go live with poor people and just dig living and be happy. But she seems so changed . . ."

Fenton poured them each another drink.

"Look, Pascudniak boy, I'm gone tell you some'ing. When you first came here I din' like you, y'know? Long hair, blue jeans. Hmff. Wise-acre, I said to myself, tha's all he is, a wiseacre, prob'ly a pinko too.

"But I can tell, you're really a good boy. Look, tomorrow you come with me. I'll take you to my barber, my tailor, really fix you up. After that you come on down to the computer factory wi' me. Get you fixed up wi' a job, you'll be arright! Whayya say?"

So Pascal started working in the computer factory. Reimbursements accounting audit clerk machine operator trainee. Ali said if he did well she'd marry him. He didn't recall asking. Fenton took him under his wing, introduced him around, helped him make the right contacts, sign up for the right after-hours education courses.

One Thursday afternoon at the

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computer factory the loudspeakers squawked and hummed, then a voice came on. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the general manager of the factory speaking. It is my great pleasure to introduce the chairman of the board, speaking from worldwide corporation headquarters in Teaneck, New Jersey."

Another voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, my fellow workers. Many years ago my father founded this company on the three principles of good products, good services, good rewards. Those principles made this company great, and since my father's death I have tried to keep this company great through faithful adherence to those principles.

"As a result of unswerving loyalty to the principles of the chairman, it is my pleasure this afternoon to announce that as of four-twenty-one this afternoon we will have built and installed our one millionth computer. This magnificent achievement is a tribute to the hard work and dedication of you, our workers, and in recognition of this occasion all of our facilities will be closed tomorrow. We'll expect to see you all back at work bright and early Monday morning."

Fenton and Pascal rode home together in Fenton's shiny Camaro. Although the town had only a few hundred residents the traffic jam of cars leaving the computer factory tied up highways for three hours after quitting time. Fortunately for Fenton and Pascal they didn't leave work until eight o'clock so their delay was minimal.

To celebrate the unexpected holiday Fenton told the wife to scrap dinner and he sent Pascal and Ali in the station wagon to fetch pizza for all.

After dinner they listened to Glen Campbell and Anita Bryant records and then, since there was no work the next day, after Felicia and Fillippa had gone to bed the adults broke out the booze and sat drinking and watching the Johnny Carson show. The show was especially good this night, almost as if the network had known about the forthcoming computer holiday.

Johnny bantered with Doc Severinson, the band played Our Love Is Here To Stay and then segued into The Object of My Affection, followed by a Breck commercial and a heart fund appeal. After the station break Johnny introduced his two guests of the evening, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham. After hearing Dr. Graham advise the nation's young people to get high on Jesus, the members of the Farnsworth household had their seventh round of drinks.

Pascal, whose stomach was acting queasy from the combination of pizza and whiskey and whose head was beginning to buzz and spin, excused himself and made his way through the darkened room to the lavatory. Inside he shut the door, turned on the light, and leaned against the sink.

Looking into the silvered mirror above it he gazed into his own reflection. Inch-long hair, trimmed to a lawn-like surface, rose straight from his scalp. His clean-shaven and well-scrubbed face nonetheless showed lines of tension and despair. He looked lower, to his dark gray, ivy-league suit, his white shirt and dark tie, then to his carefully manicured hands tightly gripping the edge of the bowl.

From the family room he could hear the TV. The newest set of commercials had ended and Ed McMahon was announcing the next night's guests, General Lewis B. Hershey and J. Edgar Hoover. Pasky staggered one step backward and saw himself full-view in the mirror. He looked and looked, and a grin began to spread

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across his face.

The grin grew broader, his lips curling back to expose yellowed teeth that seemed to lengthen into great, predatory fangs. The grin grew bigger still; it seemed to be illuminated from within with a weird brassy light. Pascal reached for the wall switch, flicked off the bathroom light.

In the darkened bathroom his clothing seemed to have disappeared. Even his face and hands were fading from the mirror. His hair was gone, his eyes dissolved, all that was left in the mirror was the monstrous grin of the fierce brass bippy.

With a sudden snarl that covered even the sound of the TV set in the family room, the grinning bippy lunged out of the mirror and fastened its fierce fangs in Pascal's throat.

—Richard A. Lupoff

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 86)

in his throat, ripping and tearing, ignoring the pain of sharp col under my chin, for it mattered not, I was Alive—

—and I changed, became

became

another who was

I

We.

Together. Darkness, kindled in Our breast, a blaze bubbled in Our chest. Darkness fed on the light of my mind, Darkness searching my soul did find. We feel, and there are Two, and Death is I, and I am Death. Darkness eats, and turns the Light Black.

—and I tore, ripping the life from his shell, swallowing the Soul of Tar.

He'd been wrong. There was more than one meaning to *Death.* Death was Love. I could see that now.

We could see that now.

And I welcomed Tar into the Black.

—Gerard F. Conway

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by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

Tod Barnes had heard of the 'spirit' in the bottle, but this was the first time he'd actually seen it!

A Fantastic Classic

"SOMETHING wrong, buddy?" demanded a thin, piping voice, barely audible above the din.

The husky young man with the curly brown hair turned in his chair, scowling at the intrusion. But—

There was no one near him!

The brawny one reached up a somewhat unsteady hand and settled his greasy cap more firmly on the back of the kinky thatch which crowned his head. He had been sitting alone at a table in the farthest corner of *Mike's Elite Bar & Grill*, paying no heed whatever to the rowdy entertainment provided for a noisy Saturday night crowd.

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His garb itself set him apart from the revelers, for even in the most proletarian of saloons it is the custom to "dress up" for weekend dates. Yet he still was wearing his work clothes—heavy, battered safety shoes, baggy moleskin pants, gray shirt with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows, and—to top off his homely but likable features and mop of chestnut hair — the above-mentioned greasy cap.

Now, he carefully scrutinized everyone within possible speaking radius. No one gave any indication of being aware of his existence, however, let alone speaking to him.

Deciding at last that his ears had been in error, the solitary one again slumped over the table. He stared moodily into the amber depths of a quart bottle of paint remover, erroneously labeled whiskey. Old Harbor Light whiskey. Slowly, mournfully, he shook his head and sighed.

A lone tear welled up in his right eye and overflowed down his stubble-covered cheek, rippling from whisker to whisker. It reached his chin. There, for a moment, it hung suspended. Then gravity won and it plummeted to the scarred table-top: *splat!*

"Hey, you! Are you deaf?"

It was the voice again!

The young man's woeful but good-natured face betrayed bewilderment and a certain trace of panic. He stared about almost wildly, but still failed to locate the speaker. The bartender's dark warning came to mind: "You're three sheets t' the wind already, chum. Pour a quart o' *this* rotgut into your belly an' you'll be a cinch t' wake up in an alley with the screamin' mee-mees day after t'morrow." And then, philosophically: "But it's your stummick, not mine."

Was this, then, the beginning of the d.t.s?

"Here, stupid! Right in front of you! On the bottle!"

THE young man stared. His jaw dropped. He went as stiff and incredulous as if he had just swallowed a bumble bee. His eyes bugged out.

There, on top of the Old Harbor Light bottle, sat a figure—surely the most remarkable figure he had ever seen!

"Well, quit gaping, dopey. Or does your mouth grow that way?"

Still the other stared in complete and horrified fascination at the little individual perched atop the bottle. The strange creature stood not more than six inches high. He was, in most respects, a truly striking miniature of Satan himself, for a wicked-looking pair of horns and a viciously-barbed tail were among his accouterments. His face, however, was beardless. And, from stem to stern, he was a whiskey-amber color instead of the devil's proverbial red.

"All right, all right. So now you've seen me. Quit staring!"

Mopping off his sweat-beaded forehead with a bare and brawny forearm, the young man disregarded the command. Instead, he hunched forward in his seat and peered at his visitor from all angles.

"Am I crazy?" he demanded at last, in a voice that trembled slightly, "or is it just that I should take the pledge?"

The face of the creature on the bottle contorted in an exasperated grimace. "Oh, forget it. You'll get used to me. Now hurry up and tell me what's wrong. What's a man your age crying for?"

The strange apparition's words brought the husky youth's mind back to his own troubles. His underlip quivered. Big tears again filled his eyes. He started to swallow. Then, remembering that he had a lip-full of snuff, he

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thought better of it and, instead, spat a stream of Copenhagen juice straight from where he sat into a gaboon some ten feet away with deadly accuracy.

His pygmy companion whistled. It sounded like one of the higher squeaks of a violin's E-string. "Some shot!" he congratulated.

But the husky one wasn't listening. He continued to stare straight at the spittoon. And two large tears were careening down his cheeks.

"I promised *her* I'd never take another chew of snuff!" he blurted in moist misery. "I swore I'd lay off the booze. But here I am." For a moment it looked as though he were going to break down completely and sob aloud.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! No one's that bad off. What's the trouble?"

There was a note of irritation in the queer Lilliputian's piping voice. The other caught it. His attention returned to his visitor. He studied the imp-like figure's features.

IT was a strange, wizened, little face, full of wrinkles and loose skin. But the thing you noticed was the eyes. They danced with mischievous light, like those of a merry elf. Yet, at the same time, there was a gleam of more wicked humor—as if here was an individual who didn't draw too fine a line between mischief and malice.

"Say, who are you?" the young man demanded, interested in spite of himself. He shoved his cap back even further on his head. "I never saw anyone like you before."

"Maybe you weren't looking very hard," came back the tart reply. "It certainly took you long enough to see me."

"But who are you?"

The tiny figure posed pompously on top of the Old Harbor Light cork.

"I'm a spirit!" he declared.

"A spirit!"

"Sure. A whiskey spirit."

The husky young gentleman eyed his visitor dubiously. "I don't get it," he mumbled.

"Oh, quit playing dumb. You're no sap. You've heard people call whiskey spirits before now."

The other scratched his tangled mop of chestnut hair and nodded slowly. "Yes, I've heard that. But that's different."

"Different, my eye!" snorted his Lilliputian companion in vast disgust. "The reason folks call whiskey spirits is because there're spirits in whiskey. And I'm one of 'em." He strutted a bit. "Why, spirits and bottles always have been connected. It's like Burke's 'Peerage,' sort of. Now take me, for instance. I can trace my ancestry straight back to the genii King Solomon imprisoned in bottles and threw into the sea."

The Old Harbor Light's owner considered this for a while. "How is it I've never seen one of you before, then?" he probed finally. "If there's one of you in every whiskey bottle, I should have met quite a crowd."

"Sure. You have," nodded the spirit. "You just didn't see us." He hesitated, groped for words. "You see, you can't see us spirits unless your brain is tuned just right. It takes a lot of alcohol to make you sensitive enough to recognize us. Only, when you *do* meet us, and then try to tell someone about it afterward, they just claim you were drunk." He shook his head in mild perturbation. "It's quite a problem, really."

The young man nodded with him. "Yes. I can see how it would be." A pause. "Say, what do they call you?"

"Beezlebub. It's a fine old name, too. Straight from the devil himself." The bright little eyes sparkled impishly. "Don't think they didn't have a

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reason for calling me that, either. I can cause more trouble—"

At the mention of trouble, the other laughed harshly. "Trouble? Listen, little Beetlebug, or whatever your name is: I got more trouble right now than any ten spirits could cause in a thousand years."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" snapped Beezlebub peevishly, glaring up at him. "Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that if I was you. Why, I'll bet your troubles don't amount to—Say, just what *is* wrong with you?"

HIS brawny companion gulped hard. "Everything!" he confessed miserably, reaching for the Old Harbor Light and pouring himself half a tumbler of it.

"*Everything?*"

"Uh-huh. I lost my job. I lost my girl. I'm broke. Isn't that enough?"

The satanic little spirit eyed the mournful one with professional interest. "Let's try again. First, tell me who you are."

"My name's Tod Barnes. I work" —a melancholy amendment, followed by a stiff swallow of Old Harbor Light —"used to work, for the Griggs Tire Company."

"What happened?"

Tod glowered. "War. All the big wholesale tire dealers like Griggs have cut their payrolls 'way down." His jaw hardened. His brown eyes charred the table. "I got a raw deal, though. Old Griggs wouldn't just fire me like he did the rest of the boys. Oh, no. With me, he had to go through a lot of hocus-pocus and then end up by telling me he was firing me, only he might need me again, so he wouldn't give me a release so I could get another job."

"Hey, wait!" interrupted Beezlebub, looking puzzled. "What's this release business?"

Tod spat another stream of juice neatly into the spittoon, followed it with another gulp of whiskey, and then explained.

"It's a system they've dreamed up since defense came in," he said. "In a lot of places, they won't give you a job unless the last place you worked will give you a release form. That's all right. They do it so one defense plant can't steal workers from another. Only with Griggs"—he snorted angrily—, "the only reason I can't get a release is because I'm the best tire warehouseman around here, and he wants to keep me so I'll always be available for work for him. Damn him!"

The amber-hued spirit sat down on the cork again, chin cupped in hands, and studied Tod. He noted the stocky, powerful build; the muscular forearms displayed by the rolled-up sleeves; the broad, strong hands, calloused with years of hard work.

"There's a war on, isn't there?" he demanded finally, his thin, squeaky voice barely audible in the barroom's tumult. "If you can't get a job, why don't you join the army?"

The young man shook his head sadly. "Think I didn't try, little fella? But I've got a bad leg; something's wrong with the joint, and it buckles under me every once in a while. So the army won't have anything to do with me." He sighed heavily. "Gee! If only I *could* get in the army! Maybe then Molly'd forget about that rat she ditched me for!"

"Molly?" The creature on the bottle showed renewed interest. "Who's she?"

"Ah!" Tod drew an ecstatic breath. "Honest, Beezlebub, she's the swellest girl you ever saw. Dark red hair. Gray eyes. The best figure between here and New Orleans.

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"And nice! Say, you never would believe anyone could be so sweet. Of course"—he chuckled wistfully—, "she's got a whale of a temper, but I like a girl with a little life to her."

"So she ran out on you!" jibed Beezlebub.

THE spark of cheer that had come into Tod's eyes at the mention of Molly Shannahan promptly went out. His face again grew long.

"It wasn't her fault," he defended gloomily. "Everything was all right 'til Walter Dale got a job at Griggs'." And, by way of explanation: "Molly works there too. She's old Jake Griggs' private secretary." Then, resuming the original thread: "Anyhow, this Dale guy got a job there. He's one of these office lounge lizards—yellow hair, blue eyes, smooth line, all the trimmings. Molly didn't give him any play at all, at first. But then he joined the army, and I couldn't get in, and since then she's really been going for him." His face twisted in an unpleasant manner. "That rat! I'd like to wring his neck! Why'd they have to station him so near here, where he could get back to see Molly every weekend?"

Beezlebub snickered, while Tod spat again toward the cuspidor. As usual, the young warehouseman's aim was true, but this time he hung his head guiltily.

"Molly wouldn't let me chew snuff," he explained for the second time. "She said it was a disgusting habit."

The tiny figure on the bottle grinned wickedly. "So that's what you call trouble!" he jeered. "Say, you're getting off easy. You can't complain."

"I don't see what else could happen to me," snapped Tod, glaring at him and taking another slug of the fast-diminishing quart of Old Harbor Light. "I could be dead, I suppose, but that wouldn't worry me. It'd almost be a relief."

Again Beezlebub snickered. "That's what you think. I could make you so miserable—"

The somewhat bleary-eyed young Mr. Barnes made an impatient gesture. "Oh, shut up! I'm tired of listening to your bragging. I couldn't be any worse off if the black curse of Donnegal was on my head."

Unpleasant fire flashed in Beezlebub's tiny eyes. His piping voice jumped another octave higher in irritation.

"So you want a demonstration, do you!" he cried angrily. "Well, I'll show you whether I can make people miserable or not. I'll show you!"

Even as he spoke, he sprang down from the bottle and sprinted across the table toward Tod. Before that somewhat befuddled young man could realize what was happening, the whiskey spirit had jumped into his lap.

"Take that!" raged Beezlebub, unleashing a terrific haymaker straight for the pit of the brawny warehouseman's stomach.

"Oh-h-h!" gasped Tod, starting to his feet as symptoms flashed across his brain with fiendish clarity. "Ulllupp!" He lunged across the crowded floor toward the door at the rear marked "MEN."

"Call me a liar, will you?" fumed a thin voice in his ear. "I'll show you what trouble is!"

THE next instant some invisible object hooked Tod's right ankle as neatly as any lariat. He careened sidewise across the room in a headlong fall. Then his shoulder hit the bar. The shock of the blow knocked loose his last vestige of self-control. Vaguely he saw the man towering above him beside the bar, and tried to turn away

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his own head. But too late!

"Ulllupp!"

"Why, you drunken scum!" bellowed the strange man. "All over my new pants!" A hand the size of a small suitcase caught Tod by the nape of the neck and jerked him erect. "I'll teach you! When I get through with you, you won't be able to take a drink for a month."

Then a fist—twin of the one which had yanked him to his feet—exploded in Tod's face in spite of all his efforts to dodge it. He felt himself sailing through the air like a paper glider. And, through it all, a piping voice reiterated: "So you've got a monopoly on trouble, have you? Well, Mister Tod Barnes, just wait' til I'm finished!"

But Tod hadn't spent five years in the rough, tough school of warehousing for nothing. Even in the brief instant between the time his feet left the floor under the impetus of the big stranger's blow, and the moment his head crashed into the opposite wall at the end of his fist-powered flight, he somehow regained control of his arms and legs. With a wild war-whoop, he charged back across the room, fists driving like pistons. In a matter of seconds he and his adversary were rolling about on the floor in savage embrace, cheered on to battle by the enthusiastic shouts of the gentlemanly and ladylike patrons of *Mike's Elite Bar & Grill.*

"Jiggers! De cops!"

Tod staggered clear of his opponent just in time to see one of the last of the customers head for the window with his —Tod's—bottle of Old Harbor Light.

"No you don't!" roared the embattled warehouseman, lunging after the thief. His quarry promptly hurled back the bottle. It caught Tod square in the chest. For a moment he wobbled a bit. His hands, however, instinctively caught the missile before it could fall to the floor. Then blue-coated figures were charging in through the front entrance.

Without waiting to inquire as to their object, Tod moved to a strategic position beneath the table in one of the booths which partially lined the barroom. There he stared somewhat stupidly at the half-empty bottle of Old Harbor Light.

"Trouble!" he muttered. "Talk about trouble!"

SUDDENLY, as he gazed at the bottle, he remembered that he had no more money. That this was the last whiskey he was likely to get in a long time.

With a jerk he freed his belt from its loops. Pulling up one trouser-leg, he hastily strapped the bottle to his calf, praying the while that it would not make too noticeable a bulge. He had barely gotten the pant-leg readjusted when a nightstick nudged him firmly in the back and a bored voice suggested that he come out before he was knocked out.

His opponent, he discovered, already was in the hands of the law. Tod examined him with interest. He was taller than Tod by several inches, but built on the same burly plan. His black hair was slicked down as with shellac, and he wore what had obviously been an expensive suit previous to the evening's entertainment.

"O.K., you stiffs," said a patrolman, ignoring their protests. "Get moving. The wagon's outside."

It was as he climbed into the Black Maria that Tod caught the glimpse of Beezlebub's tiny amber form. The malicious little spirit was riding on his shoulder.

"Trouble?" jeered the imp at the same instant the young warehouseman sighted him. "Trouble? Buddy, I'm

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not even started!"

And then, as Tod's hand descended in a vicious sideswipe, the queer creature was gone, leaving naught but an echo of mocking laughter behind him.

Beezlebub's ominous warning still was ringing through Tod's brain when, some 20 minutes later, he and his erstwhile opponent were shoved into the city jail's drunk tank. Heedless to the other occupants' hilarious greeting, the young warehouseman found himself a seat on a strap-iron bunk and meditated sourly on his situation. His companion, however, told all and sundry about their argument in belligerent tones, the while glaring threateningly at Mr. Barnes.

"Of all the damned fool stunts for me to pull, this was it," Tod muttered to himself. He took time out again to straighten his cap, and to scratch his head in perplexity. "Beezlebub was right. You always can have more trouble. And if Molly ever hears I got jugged for a drunk—"

Another voice interrupted this soliloquy.

"Chee!" it said pityingly. "An' youse look like a nice young guy, too!"

Tod glanced up. Before him stood the epitome of all bleary-eyed bums.

"I don't get it," the younger man commented a bit curtly. "You act like I was slated to walk the plank at dawn." The ludicrous aspect of the whole thing suddenly struck him. He managed a rather weak grin. "Cheer up, friend. They'll let me out in the morning."

THE bum shook his head sadly. "Oh, they'll let youse out, all right, all right. An' den what? The woiks!" More headshaking. "Chee! An' youse look like a nice—"

"Change the record," interrupted Tod. "I've heard this one before."

"Eh? What's dat?" The bum swayed to and fro like a sapling in a stiff breeze. "But chee, bo, youse act like nuttin' had happened. An' youse as good as laid out on de slab at de morgue right now . . ." The pathos of the picture overwhelmed him. Two of the biggest tears ever to well from human optics rolled down his purple-blotched cheeks, realistic as any Hollywood glycerine imitation.

Tod felt the hair on the back of his neck rise in a wave of jitters. "What d'you mean, I'm as good as laid out at the morgue?" he demanded in a voice that croaked in spite of himself. He swabbed the sweat from his broad forehead with a somehow trembling hairy forearm. "There's nothing the matter with me—"

The bum wobbled closer and pawed consolingly at the brawny one's shoulder. "Sure, chum, dere's nuttin' de matter. Nuttin' a-tall. Oh, chee!" He burst out with a whole stream of alcoholic sobs.

"Hey, you rum-pot, what's wrong with you? You act like the world was coming to an end." He heaved the bum to a seat on the strap-iron cot. "Quit the bawling. I'm all right."

The other stared at him soddenly. "Doncha know, chum? Re'lly, doncha know?"

"Don't I know what? What the hell's wrong with you?" Irritation overwhelmed Tod. He shook the old bum vigorously.

"Doncha know who dat guy youse pushed around is?" Horror stalked through the rum-pot's burbling words. "Doncha? Hones'?"

"No, I don't. And I don't care—"

"But Steve Kroloski, chum! Youse *gotta* care—"

"Steve Kroloski!" Tod's voice skittered about among the octaves like a 14-year-old's. He came half to his feet by sheer reflex. Every kinky hair on his head had gone stiff and straight, he

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was convinced, and was standing on end. "Not Steve Kroloski!"

"His hoods'll knock youse off like *that!*" the bum assured him solemnly, trying unsuccessfully to snap his fingers. "Dat guy don' care who he bumps off. Youse'll walk outa de jail an' dere dey'll be. T'ree guys in a car. One drivin' an' two wid sawed-off shotguns. Chee!" He wept again. "Chee! An' youse is such a nice—"

But Tod was not listening. He was gulping like a fish out of water, instead, and he could feel a drop of icy sweat carving a channel down his backbone, and gathering momentum as it rolled. Without thinking, he crammed a chew of snuff into his lip.

A PIPING voice close to his ear said: "So! You wanted trouble, did you? Well, how'd you like this? I'll show you—"

"Beezlebub!" Tod jumped at the sound of the whiskey spirit's voice. Before he could turn his head, however, the little imp had jumped to his knee, there to continue to mock him.

"Beezlebub, please!" begged the burly warehouseman. "I take it all back. I'm sorry I ever said it. You *can* make trouble. You can make more trouble than anyone or anything in the whole world. Heaven help the U.S.A. if Hitler ever gets you on his side!" He shuddered slightly. "But please, Beezlebub, let's call it quits, with you the winner. This guy Kroloski doesn't play. He means business! He's the worst racketeer in the state. He'll have me bumped off for hitting him, like someone else would drink a glass of orange juice for breakfast."

A wicked leer contorted the spirit's wrinkled amber features. "Oh! So now you want to give up, do you?" he chortled. "Well, Mister Tod Barnes, you'll find I mean business, too. You wanted trouble, and I'm going to give it to you. Try and make me stop! Just try—"

Tod's hand shot out, as if he were trying to catch an invisible fly. His fingers slapped shut. But the imp was uninjured. Indeed, he had sprung to a new place on top of the husky young warehouseman's knotted fist.

"Try to kill me, will you!" he screamed in his high-pitched voice. "I'll show you! Oh, just wait and see the trouble you'll get, now. Just wait and see!"

And, with a final defiant flourish of his barbed tail, he was gone, leaving behind him a quaking young gentleman who already could visualize relatives marching into the morgue with melancholy tread to identify the shot-riddled corpse of the late lamented Theodore Barnes.

Anxious minutes passed while Tod gnawed his nails down to the second knuckle. The nervous perspiration of the soap ads soaked his shirt. Once or twice he sneaked glances across the drunk tank to where burly, black-haired Steve Kroloski, king of the rackets, sat glaring at him. Tod felt his spirits drop to a new low. He was a normally courageous young man—maybe even a little more so than most. Certainly he was competent to take care of himself in most situations. But this—this was different. For Kroloski had a reputation for viciousness and cunning that was fast nearing the point where even the FBI would be interested.

"Pete O'Hare. Knifer Chinacka. Marty Sedgwick," muttered Tod, recalling the names of some of Kroloski's latest victims. It was an unpleasant thought; all of them had themselves been professional killers. It was a cinch they had been better prepared to defend themselves than he would be. But they were very dead indeed—all of

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them. And, as a nicely sentimental gesture, one Steve Kroloski had sent flowers to the funeral of each.

"OH!" choked Tod. "Poor Molly . . . I'll never see her again." He ran nervous, muscular fingers through his kinky brown hair, spat a stream of Copenhagen juice into a distant corner with accustomed accuracy, and gave himself up rather completely to despair.

It was while lying in this black abyss of hopelessness that his subconscious picked up the unpleasant sound of Steve Kroloski's voice.

"Where the blank blank blank is that blank blanked mouthpiece of mine?" the racketeer fumed aloud, though addressing himself to no one in particular. "What's that blank blank blank mean, leaving me stuck in a blank blank stinking hole like this? What's he think I'm paying him for, blank his blank blanked hide? I'm no cheap hood, what's got to put up with this kind of thing!" Mr. Kroloski snorted with rage and such vehemence that Tod fully expected to see twin sets of steam pencil, dragon-like, from his ample nose. "Ah! What a hole! What a stinking, lousy, blank blanked hole! Damn! What I wouldn't give for a drink!"

"A drink!" choked Tod under his breath. The light of hope glowed suddenly in his eyes. "I got a drink. In fact, I got a whole half-bottle of 'em strapped to my leg"

Pulling himself to his feet before his nerve could ooze away, he crossed the tank with that peculiar loping gait so common to men who handle heavy weights. Before he had passed the halfway mark, Steve Kroloski was up.

"So help me, you come near me an' I'll tear you apart with me bare hands!" the racketeer grated, mayhem gleaming from both black eyes.

Tod gulped. "Look, Mister Kroloski, you don't understand," he answered with careful meekness. "I didn't mean to mess you up. It was an accident."

Kroloski's bull neck swelled. "Oh, tryin' to snake out of it now, are you?" he snarled. "A lot of good it'll do you, you blank blanked blank!"

"Please, Mister Kroloski!" Tod made placatory gestures, and with some difficulty swallowed the insults. He felt confident, in his own mind, that he could lick this thug any day of the week, outweighed and outreached though he was. But the specter of the racketeer's gunmen hung before his mind's eye to deter him from any notion of actual attack.

"Oh, shut up! Crawlin' on your belly ain't gonna help you now."

Again Tod swallowed a rising rage. "Didn't you say you wanted a drink, Mister Kroloski?"

"A drink? My God, yes! Have you got one? Where is it? Let me at it!" The racketeer clutched the husky young warehouseman and dragged him to a seat. A moment later he was gulping down Old Harbor Light as if it were water. Then, as it turned to liquid fire within him, the big gangster drew a deep breath, based apparently on some personal theory of air-cooling.

"What rotgut!" he choked. "But it's whiskey, and anything goes in this hole."

NOW, however, the other jail guests sighted the liquor. They swept forward like the tide coming in. Tod took a spraddle-legged stand between them and the racketeer.

"I'll slug the first one of you who comes any closer!" he declared grimly, working on the theory that this should go far toward clearing his record with the gangster. But he had undoresti-

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mated the lengths to which a rum-soaked stew-bum will go to get a drink.

"Whiskey!" The drunks chanted it as if the word were a battle cry. As one, they charged. The young warehouseman went down under a barrage of arms, legs, and breaths. He caught a glimpse of Kroloski swinging back the bottle as if it were a club.

But the next instant all hell broke loose. Drunks began staggering backward in all stages of confusion, bellowing epithets and stumbling over each other in a mad rush for anywhere but where they were.

Seconds passed while Tod sat scratching his curly thatch in stunned bewilderment at the exodus. Then he got the vaguest of flashes of an amber streak close on the trail of the last laggard.

"Beezlebub!"

Like magic the satanesque little figure appeared on his knee, barbed tail swishing wickedly. The tiny eyes sparkled with malicious joy.

"Brother," Tod declared with feeling, "that was a noble deed."

"Oh, it was noble, was it?" leered the whiskey-hued imp. "Well, just you wait and see how noble it was!"

The husky one felt a wave of misgiving dash over him. "What is this?" he demanded. "What d'you mean?"

"You wanted trouble, didn't you?"

Protestingly: "But I've had trouble. Too much trouble."

"Trouble? You don't know what it means, yet." Beezlebub snickered in his most devilish fashion. "But you will. That's why I got you out of this jam by driving away those drunks. I've got other plans for you." Another wicked laugh. "*Worse* plans!" And—like that—the tiny spirit was gone.

Beezlebub—!"

"Hey, you off your bat?" interrupted the voice of Steve Kroloski. "What you talkin' to yourself for?"

Tod pulled himself mournfully to his feet. "One of those stiffs must have landed a lucky punch," he explained, rubbing his jaw in rueful substantiation. "My head's still spinning."

The racketeer showed his tonsils in a guffaw. "That sure was a sight," he roared, slapping his thigh with one of the suitcase-model hands. "They was swarmin' all over you. But they sure went the other way when I swung that bottle." He extended the nearly empty Old Harbor Light flask to its owner. "Here, buddy. You better strap this back on your leg. We don't want no dumb screw takin' it away from us."

TOD was barely pulling down his pant-leg again when a guard appeared.

"Steve Kroloski!" he called. "Come on out."

The big gangster rose. "Ah!" he grunted. "So that blank blanked mouthpiece of mine finally got here." Then, turning to Tod: "What's your name, buddy?"

Crossing his fingers, the young warehouseman announced it. And added, under his breath: "I hope he isn't just lining up advance data for his bump-off squad."

A moment later the guard was back. "Theodore Barnes!"

In a matter of minutes, Tod found himself standing outside the jail, once more a free man. Steve Kroloski was beside him. The lawyer already was heading down the street.

"Gee, thanks a lot, Mister Kroloski," effused Tod. "I'd have been in that tank 'til Christmas, probably, if you hadn't gotten me out." He paused. Then: "Well, I guess I better be getting home now. So long!"

One of the big gangster's oversized hands promptly descended on his shoulder. "Hey, wait a minute, Barnes. You

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ain't goin' no place."

Tod's heart stopped dead. Again he saw visions of lonely country roads, black touring cars, and leering trigger men.

"I like you," the racketeer continued, beaming. "You got nerve. I can use your kinda people. You come along with me and tell me all about you."

A few moments' meditation convinced Tod of the wisdom of agreement. In half an hour he and Kroloski were entering the latter's east-side headquarters.

"So old Jake Griggs gave you a raw deal, huh?" muttered the big thug. "Say, buddy, that's fine. I got just the job for you. You'll love it." He chuckled heavily.

"What is it?" There was a note of anxiety in the young warehouseman's voice. He couldn't forget Beezlebub's threat of more trouble to come. Somehow, he had a hunch that things were going too smoothly; that this, indeed, might be the beginning of the portended grief.

The racketeer grinned and slapped the other on the shoulder.

"It's a cinch!" he enthused. "A lead-pipe cinch. Old Griggs has got the biggest tire warehouse in the state. I been planning to knock it off tonight. With the rubber shortage there is, we can bootleg those non-skids for more money than there is in the mint." He guffawed. "If that isn't a good one! We'll have old Griggs' best warehouseman to play overseer while we hi-jack his tire vaults!"

TOD gulped. "Look, Steve," he pointed out, "robbing that tire warehouse is like trying to walk off with the Fort Knox gold. Old Jake Griggs isn't any sap. He's got that place so looped up with burglar alrams a rat couldn't get in. And to top it off, he sealed up all the doors but one, and put a regular vault door in there, with a combination and everything. You wouldn't have a chance of getting in."

"Don't kid yourself, Barnes," advised the gangster. "You think we didn't finger that job? Everything's all taken care of. In another hour we'll have truck-loads of tires rolling out."

Tod breathed a silent prayer that the beads of sweat which he felt on his forehead didn't show. For the dozenth time he readjusted his cap and spat with deadly precision into the racketeer's waste-basket.

"Well, if everything's all set," he remarked in what he hoped was a casual tone, "then you won't need me along to help. So I'll be on my way home and get some sleep. It's nearly two a.m. now." Rising, he started for the door.

And, once again, Kroloski's big paw stopped him cold. He turned, and noted with nervous interest that a large automatic pistol had appeared in the gangster's other hand.

"Barnes," said Kroloski, "you're not goin' to disappoint me by turnin' out to be a blank blank yellow dog, are you?"

Licking his dry lips with a tongue that suddenly felt like a piece of old shoe leather, the young warehouseman eyed the gun thoughtfully.

"Why, no, of course I wouldn't disappoint you, Steve," he said at last.

Kroloski beamed. "I knew you wouldn't let me down!" he declared triumphantly. "We could do all right without you, but you might be quite a help if somethin' unexpected came up."

He walked over to a desk in one corner of the room and pressed a button. In a matter of seconds the door opened and several individuals who looked like gorillas or ex-cons, or both, came in. With them was another, taller figure, wearing a mask.

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"Our finger man," Kroloski explained, gesturing toward him. "He don't like no one to see his mug." He nodded to two of the thugs. "You boys know what to do?"

"Sure thing, Steve. We got it down pat."

"O.K. On your way."

The two hoodlums stalked out.

Five minutes passed. Then Kroloski stuck the automatic into a shoulder holster. "That does it, boys," he declared. "Let's go."

TOGETHER, the men left the room and climbed into waiting cars. Tod noted uneasily that no chances were taken with him; always some of the thugs maneuvered themselves to cover him, and always their hands were stuck carelessly in their coat pockets. In the car, he found himself in the back seat, squeezed between two low-browed individuals.

"Well, well! So now you're a gangster. On your way to rob your old employer. Ha!"

The thin, piping voice sizzled through the brawny young warehouseman's brain like a hot knife through butter. He jumped in his seat. Instantly a hard object rammed into his ribs from either side.

"Just take it easy, Mister!" remarked the thug to his left.

"Yeah," agreed the gunsel on the right, digging him harder with the pistol barrel for emphasis, "if yuh wanta stay healthy, take it easy."

Tod took it easy.

"Won't you have a time explaining *this* to your Molly!" Beezlebub's voice plagued again. Tod could see the fiendish little fellow now; he had resumed his favorite pose on his tormentee's knee.

"You little devil!" Tod snarled. "Why can't you let me alone?"

"Trouble!" snickered Beezlebub. "More trouble than you ever dreamed of! Yes, sir, I'm outdoing myself." And then, very mysteriously: "But wait 'til you see what I've got fixed up to bring you and your Molly back together! Oh, you'll die!" His tail switched about in a spasm of glee. "Oh, you and Molly!"

"You leave Molly out of this!"

In spite of himself, Tod bellowed the command aloud. The next instant twin pistol-barrel blows knocked the wind out of him.

"Quit hollerin'!" advised the right-hand gunman.

"It ain't polite!" rejoined Number Two.

Their victim couldn't decide whether the sound he heard was the ringing of his own ears or the echo of Beezlebub's mocking laughter.

But not for long was the warehouseman left to the relative peace of his own bitter meditations on life in general, spirits in particular, and specifically Beezlebub. The car wheeled onto a familiar dead-end street and, in a moment, its occupants were hurrying toward the shadows that marked the Griggs Company's office entrance. The masked finger man led the way.

That made Tod frown some more. There was something vaguely familiar about that tall figure, but he could not quite place what it was.

"Inside!" barked Kroloski, prodding his men forward.

The masked man still leading, they went straight through the receiving and shipping departments to the big vault door old Jake Griggs had installed to protect his precious tires. There they paused while Big Steve consulted his watch.

"Two t'irty already," he grunted impatiently. "They oughta be here by now."

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AS if in echo, a distant door slammed. In a matter of seconds the two thugs he had sent out from his headquarters ahead of the rest came hurrying down the loading platform. Between them, half-dragged and half-carried along, was a slim, familiar figure.

"Molly!" exploded Tod.

The girl's head jerked up. "Tod!" she gasped. Then: "What are you doing here?"

Before the young warehouseman could open his mouth, Steve Kroloski cut in.

"This is our finger man, Miss Shannahan," he announced with more smoothness than it seemed possible he could assume. "He's the guy who figured out just how we could knock this place off. Now he's got cold feet, though. Seems like he's not as sore at his old boss as he thought he was." He laughed harshly. "He's a little late to come down with that Holy-Joe stuff, though. We're goin' through with the job." He bowed elaborately. "With your help, o' course."

"My help? What do you mean?"

Kroloski grinned evilly. "Your boyfriend, here, tipped us off that you was the only one besides Old Man Griggs who had the combination to this trick door. So you're goin' to open it. Why else did you think we got you out of bed in the middle of the night?"

"Tod Barnes, I hate you!" the girl flared, gray eyes flashing with anger. "Of all the cheap, contemptible tricks! I hope they throw you in jail for a hundred years—"

"Molly! He's lying! I never fingered this job—" The warehouseman struggled frantically against the grip of the two thugs who held his arms.

Kroloski's hand flashed out in a savage slap that sent Tod reeling. "Shut up, you punk! You were anxious enough to get the dough for this job. Now quit tryin' to crawl out from under it." He turned to Molly Shannahan. "The guy's yella. The job was his idea, an' now he's scared stiff of it."

"That doesn't make any difference to me!" she snapped. "Just because he dirtied himself with a thing like this doesn't mean I'll help you." She was a proud little figure, standing slim and erect as a young gazelle. The gray eyes, burning with anger, almost seemed to match the glow of her auburn hair.

"Don't be a sap, sister. You'll help us. You're pretty, an' I bet you'd hate like hell to end up lookin' like somethin' a bottle of acid had got at . . ." The gangster's voice trailed off to a threatening silence.

"I don't care. I won't unlock it."

Crack! Kroloski's open hand caught her full in the face with savage force.

"How about it, sister?"

"No!"

"Crack!

"Stop it, you dirty dog!" Tod foamed. He hurled himself forward with all his might, tried to twist his arms free from the mobsters who held him. "Let her alone! I'll kill you—"

THE big gangster's black eyes glittered. He whipped out his automatic, slashed down with it across the young warehouseman's face. And, as Tod went limp: "Take him over there an' hang onto him. I got work to do."

So, for five interminable minutes, while Tod bit his lip 'til the blood ran, the racketeer "worked." At last even Molly's staunch Irish spirit could stand the torture no longer. The hoodlums who held her carried her—half-blind with pain—to the vault door. Seconds later it swung open.

Big Steve Kroloski nodded his satisfaction. "Nice. Now everything's set." He turned to one of his henchmen. "Get

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movin'. Pull the trucks in as fast as you can." Then, wheeling to the thugs who held Tod: "Bring the dope into the vault. We'll tie him up 'til we get a chance to . . . take care of him."

They dragged the young warehouseman into the great, air-conditioned storage room, where monster stacks of defense-vital tires rose like columns clear to the roof.

"Remember how much trouble we were supposed to have with the burglar alarms?" Kroloski taunted Tod. He led the way to where half-a-dozen loops of wire—the bright copper of new connections glittering—protruded from a gash in the wall behind a stack of tires. "See? We just wired a new circuit around the door. It's a tricky business, but you can do it nice if you get inside help. An' that's what we had!"

A few feet farther on he halted in a corner.

"Tie him up!" he commanded.

One of the hoodlums produced a length of fishline. "They told me at the hardware this stuff'd take a hundred-pound pull," he commented as he began his work, "so six or eight turns oughta hold this bird like log chains."

Kroloski grinned. "Do a good job of it," he advised. "Then you stand guard on him."

Already the rumble of hand trucks was echoing through the warehouse. The big racketeer made a hasty check of Tod's bonds, then turned. "I gotta see they speed up the loadin'," he explained. "I'll be back soon."

THE concrete floor of the warehouse was cold and damp, and so were Tod's spirits. He lay where he had been dumped, in a sort of compromise between sitting up and lying down. This was brought about by the fact that his against the intersecting walls which joined to make the corner. All in all, it was about as uncomfortable a position as a person could imagine, especially when wrists and ankles were bound.

"Well, well!" exclaimed a thin, piping voice. "Aren't you the pretty one, now!"

"You!"

"Sure," acknowledged Beezlebub brightly. "Me."

The young warehouseman peered about, only to discover in the end that the imp was perched in the middle of his chest.

"You little devil!" he raged under his breath, glaring down at the spirit the while. "If ever any living creature deserved murder—"

"Only, you can't kill me," retorted his tormenter with great good humor. "Remember? You've been trying to do something to me all night, and how far have you gotten? Here you are, trussed up like a Christmas goose, just waiting for these goons to take you out and shoot you. I've made you sick, had you thrown into jail, fixed it so you'd get pushed around by half the hoodlums in the county, and completed the arrangements for your execution. And you were the stupid oaf who said that nothing more could happen to him! That he'd seen all the trouble there was!" The tiny demon held its sides against the ravages of its spasms of laughter, while Tod mouthed incoherent oaths.

Recovering at last, the amber son of Satan went on: "Don't forget your girl, either!" he warned. "She's in a nice spot, too. I really got clever on that one. First I had Steve Kroloski decide it would be a good stunt to make you the goat for the whole deal. He figured the girl would tell the police you planned the robbery. With you dead, that'd leave the detectives at a dead end.

"Now, though, I've planted another

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idea. I've got Mr. Kroloski to thinking that maybe he'd be safer if he didn't leave *any* witnesses. After all, you know, the girl might see his picture in the paper sometime and recognize it. So the girl's going to be killed, too. They won't bother to tell her you're innocent, though. She'll die, thinking you're the one behind it all."

"Damn you!" raved Tod. "If I had my hands free—"

"BUT you haven't!" Beezlebub pointed out gleefully. "See, you can't do a thing!" And with that, he jumped to a position on his helpless victim's nose, there to torment Tod by tickling the inside of his nostrils with the long, barbed tail.

"Ka-choo!"

The force of the sneeze sent the imp sailing through the air to a point near young Mr. Barnes' waist, but he bounced to his feet again like a rubber ball. And, when his victim's head snapped back against the wall with a *thwack,* the demon exploded into another gale of malicious merriment.

"See you later!" he shouted as he disappeared from view, leering unpleasantly. "I've got to run over to see how Miss Shannahan's execution is shaping up!"

The sound of the sneeze brought the gangster left to guard Tod back to attention.

"Catchin' cold?" he queried with mock solicitude. "Well, don't worry. You ain't gonna live long enonugh fer it to grow into pneumonia."

Ablaze with inner fury though he was, the other did not answer. Instead, he strained his wrists against the fishline, only to learn why it had been used. It was so small in diameter that it cut deep into his wrists long before stretching. He saw clearly that he had about as much chance of breaking loose from it as he had of sinking through the concrete floor.

Time and again the events of the evening passed through his weary mind. A dozen questions arose to plague him: Who was the masked man who actually had arranged this robbery for Steve Kroloski? How did he know all the details of the warehouse protection plan? Would he get away with it? And what about himself, Tod Barnes? Did he have a chance to live through this strange, mixed-up phantasmagoria, in which one wicked little spirit maliciously determined the destinies of half-a-dozen people? Or would Beezlebub's queer, distorted pattern of behavior ultimately win out?

But most of all he thought about Molly. He traced and retraced her face in his memory. Sighed over every beloved feature. And cursed the luck that had brought her here, to play the pawn for Beezlebub.

The floor grew colder and colder beneath him, until at last his teeth began to chatter. He meditated on the bad luck that had led him to go out to drown his sorrows in Old Harbor Light in his work clothes, instead of going home to put on his warmer suit. He thought, wistfully, how good a drink would taste right now.

And then it came to him!

One second it was the vaguest of hazy ideas. The next a full-grown plan. It was completely crazy, of course. No normal human being, in a normal situation, could even have thought of it without laughing. As a matter of fact, and in spite of his present plight, Tod was inclined to smile now. And the more he considered it, the more sound and logical it seemed, and the more he smiled.

HIS guard was in the throes of a long monologue. Printed and bound, it

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could well have been titled: "Rubbing 'Em Out—A Handbook of Techniques for the Modern Gangster."

"The general idea is that as soon as this warehouse is emptied, I get taken for a ride, huh?" probed Tod in a quavering voice.

"You hit it, chum. Now, I remember how we did it in t'irty-t'ree, to Lefty Alverez—"

"Sure," agreed the prisoner, in what he hoped was a whining tone, "but what about me?"

"Well, w'at about it? You gets bumped, that's all."

The young warehouseman moaned experimentally. It was, he decided, quite a success.

"Look, friend," he pleaded, "in another couple of hours I'll be dead as last Friday's fish. But right now I'm cold and sick and miserable all around. How about giving me a drink? It won't hurt you, an' it sure will help me."

His guard considered this for a while. "Dat's oke wit' me," he reported finally, "only I ain't got no hootch on me."

Trying hard to keep the elation out of his voice, Tod moved on to the next step of his campaign. "Well, I have," he said. "It's in a bottle strapped to my left leg. I put it there when I saw they were going to haul me off to jail."

"Yeah? Let's see." Somewhat suspiciously, the gunman investigated, then began to chuckle. "Say, dat's clever," he announced with grudging admiration. "You're a smart guy." He inspected the label. "Old Harbor Light, huh? Gee, dat's rotten stuff."

Tod moaned again. "Sure," he agreed, "but at least it'll warm me up. Let me have a slug of it."

"I guess dat's all right," the hoodlum decided. He uncorked the Old Harbor Light, lifted the prisoner's head a little higher, and stuck the bottle neck into his mouth. Tod gulped one mouthful of the liquid fire after another, until the last dregs gurgled.

"Hey!" protested his captor in an injured tone, "you don't hafta make a hog of yerself. I'd like a nip, too." Then, rising to his feet: "Didn' you leave none at all?"

But Tod was eyeing the thug in most peculiar fashion, almost as if measuring the hoodlum for a blow. The other did not notice it, for he was trying—unsuccessfully—to wean a drink from the bottle.

Tssspp!

Like a fire hose nozzle's initial blast, Old Harbor Light spurted from the young warehouseman's lips. Spurted in the same deadly-accurate fashion that Copenhagen juice had spurted a thousand times before. Spurted straight into the gangster's eyes!

"Aiii!" gasped the hood as the fiery stuff seared his optics delicate tissues. He staggered backward, his mouth open for a scream that never came.

FOR Tod's legs jerked spasmodically. His feet slammed into the lurching gunman's ankles. The guard crashed to the concrete floor, his head striking with a sickening thud, while the Old Harbor Light bottle flew out of his hand and smashed into a hundred pieces on the pavement.

There was a long moment of silence. Tod listened breathlessly for the sound of approaching feet. But no one came.

Painfully, awkwardly, the young husky rolled across the floor to the remains of the bottle. There, with infinite patience and at the expense of several minor cuts, he hacked away at has bonds with the broken glass.

In five minutes he was free and pulling himself gingerly to his feet. Hastily tying up the still-unconscious thug and taking his gun, Tod hurried toward the warehouse entrance. Only once did he

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pause: when he came abreast the re-circuited burglar alarm, he hesitated long enough to grin and—once again—to spit.

Hand-trucks were rumbling down the center aisle in a steady stream as sweating hoodlums rushed tires from the warehouse into waiting trucks. An unpleasant gleam lighted Tod's eyes as he took a firmer grip on the captured automatic.

"Now if only that damned Beezlebub doesn't stick his nose in again, we should have quite a party here," he muttered under his breath.

But before he could move, a little cry of terror caught his ear. It came from the far end of the warehouse. Tod spun about. Molly!

By craning his neck cautiously around a pile of tires, the young warehouseman could see the girl from where he stood. Her back was to him, and in front of her stood a gorilla-like thug who was in the act of screwing a silencer onto the end of his gun. And, because Molly was between him and the hood, Tod dared not shoot.

Stuffing the captured automatic into the waistband of his trousers, the brawny youth sped on silent feet through the next lane of tires toward the two.

"It's too bad, sister, but I gotta do it," he heard the gorilla say. "Don't worry, though; youse won't even feel it."

And Molly, with a toss of auburn curls: "Why apologize? Just go ahead and murder me!"

His heart in his mouth, Tod shivered at the situation. He could not get closer than ten feet to the gunman without being seen. Yet he dared not try shooting, for Molly still separated him from the thug.

Then, in a flash, he caught it. He remembered all the thousands of times he had hurled tires into the air so accurately that they balanced on piles far higher than his head.

In an instant he had a relatively light automobile tire in his grasp. Already the hoodlum was raising his gun. Tod clenched his teeth. He tried desperately to halt the trembling of his hands.

"WELL, I *am* sorry," said the gorilla. His face was a trifle pale, as if murdering women in cold blood was not quite in his line. But his knuckle was whitening on the trigger.

Tod hurled the tire.

High into the air it spun, like a giant's toy. The gorilla caught the flash of the movement. His face went puzzled. He stood stiff-legged and tense, suspicious but not yet quite aware of what had happened.

Tod's lips were like chalk as he watched the paper-covered rubber ring reach the ceiling of its climb. Then it was dropping . . . dropping . . . dropping, straight down in a flat fall, as neatly as if its goal were a stack of tires instead of an armed and desperate killer.

Thunk!

As neatly as ever a rope ring dropped over a peg, the tire struck home—over the gangster's head and shoulders like a life preserver, a perfect hit. It slapped the man's arms tight against his sides, knocked the pistol from his grasp.

Even as it hit, the young warehouseman sprang. In three steps he covered the space between them. His calloused fist smashed home on the thug's chin with a force that sent a stab of shock running back into his own shoulder.

"Get him!"

It was the bellow of Steve Kroloski. Tod spun about. The big racketeer was charging toward him like a mad bull.

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Tod whipped the automatic he had taken from his guard. With a single shove he sent Molly lurching back into the cover of two stacks of tires. He snapped a shot at Kroloski.

With amazing agility, the big gangster jumped sidewise. But still he came on.

Again the young warehouseman pulled the trigger. No shot! One glance told the story. The slide action was jammed back. There was no time to do anything about it. Snarling, he hurled it straight at the oncoming hoodlum with all his might.

"Cops!" a voice from the far end of the warehouse roared. "Cops! Carloads of 'em! Run for it, youse guys!"

Kroloski stopped in his tracks as cold as if he had been shot. Behind him, his gunsels already were sprinting for the exit. From outside came the thunder of guns.

"Steve! This way! Quick!"

As one, Kroloski and Tod whirled. The voice had come from the back of the warehouse. It was sharp, clear, incisive—everything that the butchered English of the gangsters was not. Somehow, it struck a familiar note in Tod's consciousness. Where had he heard that voice before?

There, far to the rear, stood the masked, mysterious figure of the finger man. He motioned frantically.

"Fire door!" he shouted. "It only opens from the inside! Hurry up!"

THE chatter of a tommy gun now joined the tumult outside the main entrance. Kroloski did not hesitate. He rushed headlong past Tod and toward the masked man.

In one jump the husky warehouseman was beside the fallen gorilla who had been scheduled as Molly's executioner. He grabbed the hoodlum's gun.

But the fall to the concrete floor had been too much for it. One side was badly cracked. And already Kroloski and the masked man were nearly to the fire door.

Tod scrambled past the still-unconscious hoodlum. He jerked up a heavy truck tire and, with the skill born of long experience, sent it rolling down the floor after the running pair. In split-seconds four more of the big nonskids were spinning after the first.

Like juggernauts, they crashed into the masked man and Kroloski, knocking the pair's legs from under them, sending them crashing to the floor before they could reach the fire door.

Before they could recover, blue uniformed police had invaded the vast warehouse and were hurrying down the aisle between the stacks of tires to make prisoners of the big racketeer and his finger man. But Tod no longer was paying them any heed. He was pulling Molly to her feet and begging forgiveness abjectly for his multitudinous sins of the evening.

Before she could answer him, bluecoats were dragging Kroloski and the masked man past them. The young warehouseman glanced up. His eyes lit on the finger man, now minus his face-covering.

"Dale!" he gasped. "Walter Dale!"

Molly gave vent to a tearful: "Oh, Walt!"

The blond, handsome young soldier — and former Griggs employee — glared. "Ah, can it!" he snarled. "I got caught. So what?"

Before he could say more, the officers dragged him away.

"Oh, Tod!" Molly wept, her face buried against her husky sweetheart's broad shoulder. "Oh, I'm so ashamed! To—to think I let you go for that—, that—, that—"

"Sure, honey, sure. It's all right,"

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Tod soothed, caressing her rippling wave of soft auburn hair. He felt a tremendous inner urge to do a little quiet gloating, but some instinct told him it would be wiser not to let her know it.

The next instant the portly figure of old Jake Griggs himself waddled into view, accompanied by the chief of police.

"Tod, my boy!" old Jake beamed. "If I ever needed any proof of just how valuable you are, this is it. Imagine fighting this whole gang of thugs alone—"

"Skip it!" Tod grunted irritably. "You give me the rawest deal of anyone in the outfit, then come belly-aching around about how valuable I am. You, that wouldn't even have the decency to give me a release so I could get another job!"

THERE was a mischievous gleam in old Jake Griggs' shoe-button eyes. "Molly," he commanded, "tell this young idiot why I wouldn't give him his precious release."

The girl raised her head. The gray eyes were proud. "Mr. Griggs got you another job," she said. "The appointment just came this afternoon. That's why Mr. Griggs wouldn't let you go. He's been trying to get you the best job possible. Only he wanted to surprise you."

"A job?" Tod's face was a study in bewilderment. "I don't get it. What kind of a job?"

Old Jake Griggs chuckled 'til his fat sides shook. "Starting Monday," he proclaimed, "you're a warehouse inspector for the tire rationing board!"

"Holy—! Say, Mr. Griggs—" Sudden scarlet flooded Tod's embarrassed cheeks.

His former employer slapped him on the shoulder, still chuckling. "Forget it," he chortled. "I know just how you felt."

NOW the chief of police broke in. "What I don't understand," he declared, scratching his head in perplexity, "is how you gave us the alarm. That burglar alarm is doctored perfect, but the bells rang down at headquarters just as if the connection had been broken.

"The alarm rings when there's a short circuit, too," explained Tod, grinning. "So when I went past the wires when I got away, I spat on 'em. Nobody had bothered to tape them, so getting 'em wet sent the whole works haywire."

Again Griggs slapped his shoulder. "Fine work, my boy. Fine work. But now"—he glanced at Molly, who still nestled in the young warehouseman's arms—"maybe you'd like to take the lady home."

"I'm sure he does," Molly agreed, smiling up at her rescuer. "He's got so much to tell me."

A POLICE car took them to her home. En route, in an outburst of unequalled frankness, Tod outlined the events of the entire evening exactly as they had happened. The lovely Miss Shannahan eyed him somewhat quizzically.

"Right now," she commented, "I'm inclined to believe almost anything you say. But that story about a little amber devil named Beezlebub . . ." Her voice trailed away and she shook her head amusedly.

"Oh, but it's true," Tod assured her. "Every word of it."

Molly smiled tenderly. "I'm sure it is," she soothed, caressing his forehead. "But you've had a hard night—drinking all that whiskey, and chewing all that snuff, and being pushed

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around. You better go home and get some sleep."

"You mean you don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you, darling."

"No, you don't."

There was a certain asperity in Molly's reply. "Look, Tod," she said. "After all, if this Beezlebub was so successful at getting you into trouble all evening, how is it he didn't finish the job? Why weren't we both killed?"

"We would have been," her sweetheart assured her solemnly, "if I hadn't gotten him first."

"Gotten him first—?"

"Sure. I killed him."

"But you said he claimed you couldn't kill him—"

"I couldn't. Not by hitting him, or things like that."

"Then how—?"

The husky young warehouseman grinned. "It came to me, all of a sudden, while I was lying there on the floor, tied up and waiting to be killed," he explained. "It was so simple I damned near laughed out loud."

"But how—? Oh, hurry up, Tod! Tell me!"

"Well, it all grew out of his being a whiskey spirit."

"You mean—?"

Again the young man grinned. "I learned a long time ago how to 'kill' whiskey," he declared, "so I did the same thing tonight. Honey, I drank every last drop of that Old Harbor Light! And then, just to make sure, I broke the bottle!"

THE END

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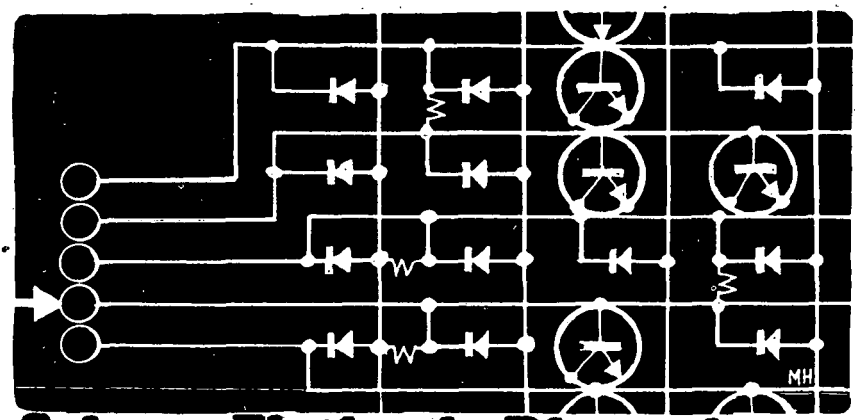

Science Fiction in Dimension

a critical column by ALEXEI PANSHIN

SCIENCE FICTION AND CREATIVE FANTASY

In his recently published book on Charles Fort, Damon Knight discusses the problems presented to science by preconceptions that have outlived their usefulness, following the argument of Thomas S. Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. What Damon has to say is so suggestive and so pertinent to the current state of science fiction that I think it bears quotation at some length:

"Kuhn shows that any science, at a given time in history, is the prisoner of its basic preconceptions, which he calls 'paradigms'. Paradigms are defined as 'universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.' Newtonian physics was such a paradigm; it was overthrown in the early years of this century—not by the graceful surrender of fair-minded scientists, as the Establishment now pretends, but only after a struggle that lasted twenty years . . .

"Kuhn shows that these recurrent crises are not only typical of science, but *necessary to its development.* The possession of a paradigm—an orthodox theory accepted by the whole community of scientists—alone makes it possible to define fruitful lines of investigation and concentrate on them. New data within a paradigm can only be accumulated, in many cases, by the use of highly sophisticated instruments which never would have been devised without the paradigm, and without long hours of laborious effort which, in the absence of the paradigm, never would have been invested.

"Because the paradigm is essential, scientists tend to resist any data which will not fit into it. Nevertheless, anomalous observations accumulate over a period of decades until they can no longer be ignored: then that science is in a state of crisis, which is only resolved by the emergence of a new paradigm.

"Scientists never willingly renounce the paradigm that has led them into crisis. 'They do not, that is, treat

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anomalies as counterinstances, though in the vocabulary of philosophy of science that is what they are . . . once it has attained the status of paradigm, a scientific theory is declared invalid only *if an alternate candidate* is available to take its place.'

"What a paradigm shift does is to break apart the whole field of a science and put the pieces together in a new way. This change cannot be accomplished without trauma, particularly in the case of older scientists who have devoted their whole lives to the paradigm under attack. Aside from any personal interests involved, they may simply be incapable of the perceptual shift required."

This long quotation is worth rereading. It is a disconcertingly accurate description of the current problems of science fiction. Our old paradigms once defined fruitful lines of inquiry. Today they seem confining. Anomalies and counterinstances have been accumulating around us for years, and been explained away as "science fantasy" or "as not really science fiction" or been ignored. They have accumulated now to the point where they cannot be ignored longer. The result has been the New Wave-Old Wave flap. By practical example, the New Wavers have launched an attack on the truly arbitrary paradigms that have so long dominated the development of science fiction, and the attack has been successful enough to drive more than one writer of the Campbell generation, which is to say, more than one of the biggest and brightest names that science fiction has yet produced, into silence. More than one has privately spoken of failed nerve. If the old rules are off, the rules they always played by, they haven't a clue to an alternative.

But the shift isn't complete. The exceptions to the rules are with us in number—the anomalies. But so far, no new paradigm, no new definition of possibility, has been suggested. And until a new paradigm is suggested, the old raddled discredited ones will still be with us, a hindrance to fresh and original effort. Even the experiments that we have had, the counterinstances, have been crippled and distorted, bent into the shape of the old paradigms at the very same time they reject them.

The implicit limitations of science fiction have been chiefly four: in subject, in form, in scope, and in style. The subject has been science and its consequences. The form, melodrama. The scope, no larger than the short novel. And the style has been only the very simplest of narrative techniques. All four of these limitations have suffered increasing attack in the last ten years, but the counterinstances have usually dared to reject only one, or at most two, of these in any single story. And yet, as the total range of exception has shown again and again, not one of the four is necessary.

If it is only now that these limitations are being explicitly realized for what they are, they have been felt by every new writer of ambition to arrive in science fiction during these past ten years, and by a good many of the writers of the generation just preceding: Aldiss, Ballard, Brunner, Dick, Ellison and Silverberg, all once content to cut their work to the shape of the old conventions, have joined the new writers—or paced them—in looking for new directions, new possibilities and new applications for science fiction.

The struggle against the old paradigms has been long and frustrating, all the more because it has never fully been realized for what it has been. It is marked

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by strange experimental tangents, and even stranger duplications of effort, explainable only by the fact that writers, particularly beginning writers, are solitary creatures doomed to work out their individual solutions in private. As evidence, I could cite the case of one young writer who was accused of being overinfluenced by the themes and even the phrasing of Zelazny and Delany—and had not, in fact, ever read them. But since I am most familiar with it, let me cite my own experience.

I began reading science fiction in 1950, at the age of ten. I grew up loving it, and from the time I was thirteen until I was well into my twenties science fiction was my primary reading. I read much else, but science fiction came first. I read most of the new science fiction published and I read my way back through the forties and into the thirties.

When I began to write, I quite naturally tried to write science fiction. And ran into trouble.

To begin with, of course I lacked all the basic skills of writing. But in time I learned them. I was able to sell stories to markets other than science fiction. My first sale was to *Seventeen* something over a year after I began to write. But I was consistently unable to sell science fiction. And I didn't know why. I wanted nothing more badly than a sale to *Astounding*, preferably illustrated by Kelly Freas.

My problem was that I couldn't follow my models. First, because I lacked the skill, but then when I had developed the skill, because my interests lay in other directions. I had small interest in writing melodrama, and no apparent talent for it whatsoever. And no interest in writing about the impact of science or technology. I had every desire to write science fiction, but not to the conventional pattern. The result was, as often as not, rejection slips suggesting that I read the magazines to which I was submitting stories and pay closer attention to the sort of fiction they were printing.

As though I didn't know what sort of fiction they were printing.

I had no preferred place to go. I wanted all the advantages of time and space. I wanted to do in an original way for other readers what had once been done for me by Heinlein and de Camp and Asimov and Sturgeon. But in time I concluded, almost necessarily, that I would have to leave science fiction. I would leave as soon as I finished the novel that I was working on.

The novel took me five years to write. In the meantime, I turned to writing science fiction criticism. I enjoyed reading criticism, and I wanted a writing change-of-pace, but most of all I think I wanted to know what I was doing. I wanted to develop a better appreciation of technique. But the writing of criticism had results I hadn't anticipated. It forced me to explicitly question my preconceptions of the nature of science fiction, preconceptions that I had accepted so totally that even my rejection of them had accepted their integrity, their basic legitimacy. I was forced to define and redefine and redefine, until by the time I finally finished my novel, *Rite of Passage*, I had come to two new conclusions. One was that the integrity of a work of art is always more worthy of respect than the integrity of any rule, categorization, preconception, theory, or editorial stricture. The other was that I would write what I pleased to write—and then if science fiction cared to co-opt it, it might, but that if it did not, small loss.

That was an answer, the necessary answer that every young science fiction

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writer of the 1960's had to arrive at, explicitly or implicitly. Alone, with no more aid than I had, every new writer had to work against the current to come to his own evasion or rejection of the old paradigms. Over and over and over again. In the face of rejection. Finding acceptance only in minor and peripheral markets until by sheer strength of will and determination they had changed the face of science fiction.

It is no accident that the best and most adventurous of the new writers—Disch, Delany, Lafferty, LeGuin, Russ and Zelazny—have never, any of them, appeared in *Analog*, the magazine that is the embodiment of the old paradigms, the magazine that was the showcase of science fiction, the true center, when they and I first began to write. It is no accident that every single one of these writers was first published in book form by Ace Books, a rightly despised market that poured out such a stream of material that it would seemingly publish anything, including these new queer and wayward notions of science fiction. In fact, LeGuin's second novel and Disch's first appeared under the same covers as an Ace Double, the lowest of the low. Delany only appeared in the science fiction magazines for the first time in 1967, after he had published seven Ace Books, including a Nebula Award Winner. And my own novel, *Rite of Passage*, when I finally finished it, was rejected by eleven publishers before it was taken by Ace.

But acceptance has been won. Not all the experiments have been successful, popular, or influential, but if anything is clear it is that the least unsuccessful and most influential books of recent years have been ambitious experiments, and many of them have been popular. *Rite of Passage* has, if *New Celebrations*, my Villiers books, has not. If *Camp Concentration* has not, *The Left Hand of Darkness* has. And of the Nebula Award novels to date, only one, the squamous *Flowers for Algernon*, has not been an Ace Book. And the Hugos have gone to *Stand on Zanzibar, Lord of Light, The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress, And Call Me Conrad*, and *Dune*, all of them, even *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, experimental. *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* is particularly interesting because Heinlein chose to experiment—unsuccessfully, I felt—with style. We could stand to see a great many more experiments with style.

The arguments for a paradigm shift have all been made. The old paradigms of science fiction—in subject, in form, in scope and in style—no longer are sufficient to define fruitful lines of inquiry. Science fiction is, if not in a crisis, in a state of panic. We are suffering growing pains. We have outgrown our old paradigms—the roof no longer covers us. We have anomalies, counterinstances who no longer sleep in the house, but who keep in constant contact with the foundation for security, huddled close against the dangers of the night. And we have people inside yelling at some of those outside—as though they had any choice except to be out there. We have everything but the new roof. We know we need a new shelter that can comfortably keep the rain off of all of us and provide us with splendid new places to play, acres bigger than the old, but until one is actually proposed, we'll have to continue living in the old tumbledown, even though it's coming down around our ears and there's no room to be comfortable.

A new paradigm is needed. If for no other reason than that until we do the best books we can ask for will be *Lord of Light* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*,

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and the truth is that as wonderful as those two books are, they are only indications of what is possible, not definitions of what is possible. There is new green country ahead, but they have only seen it; they haven't been there.

The old paradigms of subject, form, scope and style are a complex of taboos and strictures. We could symbolize them with a name, a loose label for the trivial and arbitrary limits by which we once defined ourselves. Say, for a phrase, "science fiction". A name that hardly carries the weight of "Newtonian physics". And the new paradigm could be summed as "creative fantasy". In the change, nothing essential is lost.

Science fiction in the past has constantly expanded its notions of itself. This has meant that a story like Edmond Hamilton's anti-romantic "What's It Like Out There?" could not be printed when it was written in the early thirties, but fitted quite comfortably and even had attention when it was published in 1952, the science fiction universe having expanded considerably in the meantime. And in spite of the expansion, nothing has been lost. It is still possible to write space opera, or wiring diagrams, or comic infernos, or warmed-over mythology. Everybody can be accommodated. But if these are the only possibilities open to us, they can look awfully shopworn and tired.

Science fiction has managed to expand the club to this point by requiring more and more perfunctory proofs of sincerity. At the beginning you could tell, perhaps, what was science fiction and what wasn't. Now you can't. Once there was a test. If a book was science fiction, it *explained*. But they don't necessarily do that anymore. Now the proofs are nebulous. The only way to tell about some books is to ask the author. If he tells you it is science fiction you have to believe him.

Science fiction—that is, our four paradigms, our limitations—is bankrupt. The roof's falling in.

Ah, but creative fantasy.

Creative fantasy is everything science fiction was and more. The difference is that if you write creative fantasy you no longer have to write short, write simple, write stupid and write science. You can do anything you want to. You're free. You are *out* in the universe. You no longer have to keep talking about how you got there, over and over again. You no longer have to talk about who you hit and who hit you—the old petty quarrels and motives are behind us.

Take a deep breath and look around.

Tell us about the real magics of life. Create fantasies.

Stop explaining. Stop limping. Stop stumbling over your tongue.

Write as long as you have to—and preferably no longer. Experiment with the resources of narrative and style. They are necessary tools for better stories, and we can use the best tools we can find. Write something more demanding than melodrama. Invent new forms if you must, if you can. Write about something wider than technology. There's more to the world than that, subjects far more more moving and immediate.

You can do anything that you want to do. You can do anything you dare.

—Alexei Panshin

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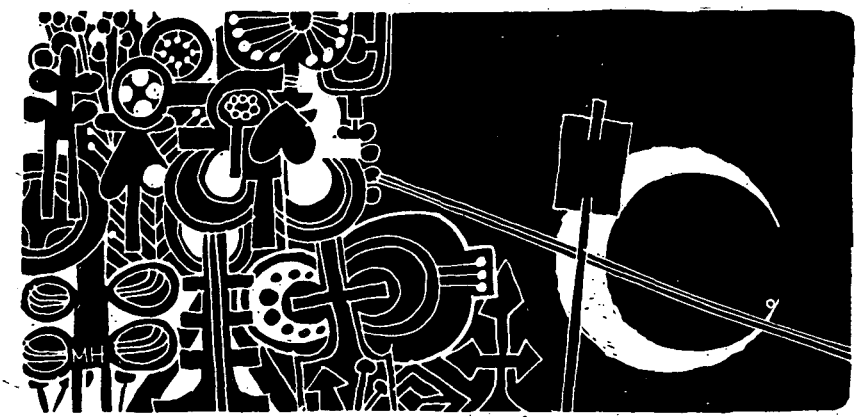

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Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, *and addressed to* According To You, *c/o P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232.*

Dear Mr. White:

I picked up a copy of FANTASTIC at the local newsstand today and read your editorial relative to Scientology, *Stranger in a Strange Land,* ritualistic murder, drugs, crowding and rotten politics. Frankly, I was astounded by such frothings masquerading as responsible editorial comment.

I suppose charitably charging your babbling to your, evident, extreme youth would be the Christian thing to do, and I would do so if it were not for the fact that your vituperation was given national circulation through your magazine. However, someone must call you to account for your irresponsibility.

To take your mouthings in the order in which they appeared, there's no reason that Dianetics shouldn't provide results essentially similar to psychotherapy since it is a regression technique used by analysts for many years.

Stranger in a Strange Land contains a philosophy of interpersonal relationship that is beautiful in it's *(sic)* simplicity and workability, but hardly new. The only thing really new about the book is having the hero come from out of the heavens, and, somehow or other, even that has a familiar ring.

Ritualistic murder and drug abuse are hardly new problems, either. They have been occurring with disgusting frequency ever since man found that other men could be eaten to supplement the protein supply and that mushrooms could give you a high. The thing that *is* new about the Sharon Tate-murder, and things like it, is that all the gory details can be broadcast in living color at 186,000 miles per second to, practically, every home in the U.S.A.

Crowding is new, and people trying to escape within themselves from an

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undesirable world is simply an old path trod for a new reason. The way to handle the overpopulation problem would seem to be to reduce the population. *(Funny no one else has thought of that!—TW)* Maybe if we keep building and selling 300 horsepower automobiles quickly enough, that problem will solve itself. Maybe a good, old fashioned war will solve it. Maybe we'll get smart and just limit reproduction and save ourselves from annihilation.

That leaves your strange political diatribe as the last item. How can you blame the Nixon administration for the chain of events leading to drug deaths is beyond comprehension. *You* said that the kids are turning to drugs to turn inward and escape the pressures of crowding. Certainly you don't blame the Republicans, who have been in office two years, for the crowding, do you? Blame, instead, welfare programs, medicine, agri-industry and technology. And, of course, the Catholic Church.

Your left wing showed very strongly in your condemnation of what purports to be, but isn't, a conservative administration. You can't be so naive as to believe that a minority political party has any great amount of control over the methods that the populace chooses for self-destruction. It is the *people* who shoot the drugs, drop the acid, raise bond issues for more highways and generally foul the earth with their screaming brats, excrement, litter and trash.

If you have to have something to get "up tight" over, why don't you join the non-political struggle to save our biosphere. Work to send the automobile down the path marked by the dinosaur and the dodo. Put pressure on the industries that pollute the air, the water, the quiet and the scene. *(Scenery?)* Help to take the pressure off the redwoods, wilderness areas and the animals. We can't live without the things we're fouling and killing and we need all the help we can get to save our world before it gets polluted beyond redemption.

However, if you intend to join this crusade, keep your facts straight or the $88 billion per year automobile industry will jump on you with hob-nails.

I hope you join us.

Rev. Dr. C.E. Deckard, B.S., D.D., Ph.D.
Route 1, Box 111
Gardner, Kansas, 66030

Well, Dr. Deckard, I have carefully re-read my editorial in the August issue, and I have read your letter. I will leave it to others to decide if indeed you have 'called me to account for my irresponsibility,' but I do object to your choice of epithets. You term my editorial "frothings," "babbling," "vituperation," "irresponsibility," and "mouthings," but as nearly as I can tell, you actually object only to my comments about Richard Nixon. Under such circumstances, your "charitably" attributing my "babbling" to my "extreme youth" seems less than appropriate. (Youth is a relative concept, but since I'm over thirty I don't believe I could be considered an "extreme youth" in any case.)

I don't propose to debate with you on most of the topics you comment upon, especially since you have simply restated my own statements to a large extent. Dianetics and Scientology get a thorough going over in Barry Malzberg's piece on the subject in the November AMAZING, now on sale. Stranger in a Strange Land *is a book I described as "a curious blend of* Saturday Evening Post *salaciousness and half-baked mysticism." Heinlein's "philosophy of interpersonal relationship" is based upon "Martian"*

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magic and to that extent is perhaps simple, but not workable. The workable parts are lifted from valid mystical philosophies and, as you said, "hardly new." Your comments on overpopulation strike me as frivolous, especially the one about building and selling more "300 horsepower automobiles," and in contradiction to your later wish for the car's extinction.

The point on which you are least informed, however, is drug-abuse. Like most people you confuse such very diverse drugs as heroin and "acid" (LSD-25). The subject deserves treatment at much greater length than I can give it here, but, boiled down, it comes to this: drug-use is moving down the age-ladder into the primary ("grade") schools. Some of the drugs involved (like marijuana) are relatively harmless. Others (like barbituates, "speed," and heroin) are not. (There is relatively little interest in the psychedelic drugs among the younger drug users.) There are two factors involved. One is the appeal of drugs to these children. The other is the availability and nature of these drugs. The first aspect is multifacited. Drugs are undoubtedly an "escape inward," as I did indeed point out. Their use is made attractive by such factors as peer-group pressure, the desire to copy older kids and adults (when I was a kid, smoking cigarettes was the way to "feel big"), etc. Even the risks involved offer a certain appeal. (As has been pointed out, kids are rarely concerned with consequences, and such dangers as addiction or death by overdose only make the act of using heroin a more daring—and therefore exciting—risk.)

The availability question is something else again. The Nixon administration has deliberately played upon middle-class, mid-American fears, superstitions and prejudices. While ignoring the very real problems which beset our country, Nixon has waged a "War on Smut"—a "popular" move, but remarkably asinine—and a drive against marijuana. Note this well: at a time when doctors, psychiatrists and legislators are moving to reduce the penalties against the use of marijuana or to legalize its use, Nixon has come out for tougher laws, and, last year, launched his infamous "Operation Intercept," an attempt to blackmail Mexico by harrassing its tourist trade. The result of Nixon's policies is well documented: the supplies of marijuana "dried up" last summer, with prices climbing and quality plummeting—while heroin prices fell, and the "hard" drugs like heroin moved in to fill the vacuum. Marijuana is sold in this country by underground networks of relatively unorganized people who are "criminals" only in the fact that their commodity is illegal and must be smuggled in. Heroin is sold by a monopoly totally under the control of "organized crime"—or "the Mafia," to use the popular term. It is a curious coincidence that the Nixon administration and its Attorney General has preferred to prosecute hippies, Yippies, demonstrators, and marijuana smokers—all people who are victims of mid-American prejudice—than the capitalists of organized crime. In this sense, the Nixon administration most certainly does have a "great amount of control over the methods, that the populace chooses for self-destruction." When heroin is easier for a grade-school child to buy than marijuana, as a direct result of administration policy, then the administration is indeed responsible for deaths of such children from heroin overdoses.

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The issue here is not "drugs." "Drugs" is a catch-all term which includes the contents of most mid-Americans' medicine cabinets, and a wide variety of "non-prescription" items widely advertised on television. "Drugs" are substances which change the way in which the body functions. Most have some beneficial uses (even the opiates). All can be abused. The widespread use of drugs in this country is a major problem, of which the consumption of illegal drugs by minors is only a portion. It is, however, a quite tragic portion, and one any sensitive adult must meet and consider with concern. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

The most serious problem of the alcoholic or the psychologically addicted marijuana smoker is his inability to diagnose his own illness. Whoever Donald K. Arbogast is, he already needs help!

A common trait of the addict is his superior attitude toward the lush, evident throughout the article ("Science Fiction and Drugs," *Fantasy Fandom*, June, 1970). Those who are addicted to marijuana in particular also seem to need to evangelize others or to extol the use of pot as a panacea in the world of social pressures.

These rather harmless symptoms could easily be overlooked were they not coupled with others of a more serious nature. First, he draws a parallel between the practice of race bigotry and the enforcement of narcotics laws—an indication that rational value-judgements are breaking down. Second, and most important, he indicates inability to conceive of facing leisure time in the world as it really is without the dulling effect of chemicals—either booze or marijuana.

This either-or attitude implying that there must be a decision between either weed or hooch totally ignores the truth that millions of people really enjoy life without the need for needles, pills, pot, or booze! The idea that there might be a clean and sober life never crosses his mind—a clear indication of the obsessed mind of the alcohol or drug addict.

Of course there are a lot of drunks, hopheads, and junkies in sf writing—as everywhere else today. The idea that their philosophies and solutions to life's problems are of any special value to sf readers—even as purely escape—is ridiculous. Let's have writers who have found answers for themselves without having to blow their minds when faced with the challenges of everyday living.

Arbogast, of course, will disagree—he already has in his article—but the only reason he wants to write sf with a drug slant is because his obsessed mind won't let him write about anything else. He just wants to capitalize on his addiction at the expense of the thinking public. Let him put *that* in his pot-pipe and smoke it while investigating some of the many programs for the rehabilitation of alcoholics and addicts—he needs it.

Cline Clark
439 S. Bonnie Brae #301
Los Angeles, Calif., 90057

Donald K. Arbogast replies:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to read Mr. Clark's letter: it is a remarkably inappropriate response to my article, but it certainly illustrates one prevailing attitude in common coin today.

I was purposefully vague about my own experiences with drugs—they are, after all, illegal—but Mr. Clark evidently possesses the power of omniscience. He has concluded that I am an "addict" (a

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medically imprecise term), that my "rational value-judgements are breaking down," and that I've neither experienced nor thought of "a clean and sober life." His closing paragraph is the most offensive of the lot—the smugness with which he informs the world that I want to write about drugs is "because (my) obsessed mind won't let (me) write about anything else."

Mr. Clark has undoubtedly read a good number of my stories—under my real name. I challenge him to identify my identity by searching out the drug-references in those stories. I make this challenge a bit sarcastically, however, since I've never written about drugs in my stories—and my only writings on the subject were confined to the single article he read in this magazine.

Two can play Mr. Clark's game, however, and on the basis of his letter, I'd suggest that the man is intellectually ossified, morally bankrupt, and offensively pious. When he cites what he terms my "parallel between the practice of race bigotry and the enforcement of narcotics laws" as "an indication that (my) rational value-judgements are breaking down," I am struck in turn by the extent to which his own rationality has deserted him. The facts, after all, are rather plain to be seen: the laws against use, possession and growing marijuana are extreme. One state in the east sentences first-offenders to *forty years imprisonment*. This is what we call "crime by legislation." A man who consumes pot in the privacy of his own home is not committing an antisocial or endangering act. At absolute worst, he is harming only himself. To pass a law that says this man is a dangerous criminal and then lock him up—is this rational? Can Mr. Clark defend it upon grounds of rationality? In the same state manslaughter brings a sentence of only five-to-ten years, and even assault and rape draw milder penalties. Under the circumstances, few pot-smokers consider the laws against their activities "rational," intelligent, or even sensible. Not unsurprisingly, a growing body of *non*-smokers are agreeing with them.

It will come as a shock to Mr. Clark, but one of the freedoms this country was founded on was the freedom to "pursue happiness." This pursuit has known many forms, but one of the oldest has been the consumption of alcohol. Mr. Clark may, with some justification, frown upon this practice—I hope he doesn't ever slip and enjoy a glass of wine with his meals—but his puritanical condemnation of inebriation does not obviate its popularity. Witness the tragic experiment of Prohibition. Right now we are experiencing a second Prohibition—which has been with us only since 1937—and its consequences. If there is a lesson to be found in it, it is that, Mr. Clark to the contrary notwithstanding, people like to be able to choose their own poison—if poison it be.

But I'm afraid that in reacting to the tone of Mr. Clark's letter I am allowing myself to be backed into the corner to which he has already condemned me. Despite the insistence of his letter, I am not a helpless addict, bound to a seamy life of despair. I frequently go long periods of time—months even!—without the demon weed touching my lips. I've been known to take long walks in parks, to go camping in the country, and to long wistfully after the ownership of a farm. Why, I was even a Boy Scout in my own improbable youth, and even now I suspect I could outperform Mr. Clark on a Camperee.

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The purpose of my article was neither to support nor condemn the role of drugs in our lives—but simply to point out that they are *there,* and to call attention to some of their effects, while asking questions about their ramifications on our own future. Clearly they *will be* in our future—in one form or another they dominate us right now (do you smoke cigarettes, Mr. Clark? Recent studies indicate that nicotine has a physically addictive effect upon the brain not unlike that of heroin)—and there are a variety of directions in which they can—and will—push our society. The question of just *how* they will affect our future is, I think, as valid as any we sf writers presently face. The situation will not disappear, Mr. Clark, simply because you wish it would. Rational discussion (conspicuously absent in your letter) would seem preferable to polemics.

Donald K. Arbogast
Hollywood, California

Dear Ted:

Your editorial on overpopulation paranoia in the August FANTASTIC brings to mind how two old, vast and frightfully crowded societies—India and pre-Mao China—long coped with the problem. The Chinese did it by an elaborate system of obsequious etiquette: "Will Honorable Sir deign to enter my filthy hovel and meet my hideous wife and degenerate children?" The Indians did it by dividing society into a multitude of little endogamous occupational groups (*jatis* or sub-castes) and erecting stringent tabus against any social relationships between members of different sub-castes. I doubt, however, if either system (both of which have their disadvantages) would work for us.

L. Sprague de Camp
Villanova, Pa., 19085

And both seem to have broken down anyway. —TW

Dear Mr. White,

I don't know why you bothered to bring up the Sharon Tate murders in your August editorial. I've read and heard so much about the affair that I'm sick of it. I think it's a tragedy, but in my opinion there has been too much written and said about it and why it happened. Next time, just stick to science fiction (please).

I'm glad to see "Richard Lupoff" back. "Music in the Air" is almost as good as "Man Swings SF".

"Always the Black Knight" was very good. In fact the only serial that I can remember being better was "Axe and Dragon" by Keith Laumer which appeared in FANTASTIC about five years ago.

I'm glad to see Fritz Leiber is going to be back next issue with his book reviews. I've missed him in the June and August issues.

J. Collinson
9709-79th Ave.
Edmonton 63, Alberta, Canada

There's a limit to what I can say about science fiction without repeating myself. The Tate murders prompted my speculations on the effects of overpopulation in this country, and as such opened the door to a much broader topic. I can't promise that I won't pursue such topics in the future if I think one will lead to a good editorial. On the other hand, I hope you appreciate the subtlety of our timing in publishing Keith Laumer's sequel to "Axe and Dragon" beginning in this issue . . . —TW

Dear Mr. White:

When you announced in the June issue

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that you were going to have a *Fantastic Illustrated* feature begin in the August issue, I felt like crying! I almost wrote to plead, nay, even beg you to please not turn FANTASTIC into a *damn comic book* like *GALAXY* has done with that "crap" by Bode!

Now I bought the August issue with much trepidation (and a lot of reluctance, too!) and sure enough on the cover, "Beginning in this issue, *Fantastic Illustrated,*" omigawd! They did it!

But I went through the complete 146 pages, plus covers, and *nowhere* did I see any so-called *Fantastic Illustrated!* What a wonderful surprise! Maybe Ted had a change of heart, I thought hopefully! Maybe he will keep FANTASTIC an *adult* magazine and not a *God-damn comic book* after all!

Normally, I do *not* pre-judge anything or anyone. But after seeing the so-called "art" (???) by Bode in *GALAXY* I must protest and ask you to please not put stuff like that in "our" FANTASTIC! *Please?*

Bob Snow
P.O. Box 550
San Bernardino, Calif., 92402

P.S.: I note that the June issue of *GALAXY* did *not* have Bode's "Sunpot" junk in it. Do you suppose they finally wised up?

To each his own taste, Bob. Thus far we have received about forty-five complaints about the absence of Fantastic Illustrated *from the August issue (or almost 50% of those who wrote), and one sigh of relief—yours. And by now you've had an opportunity to sample the feature in the October issue and see if it lived up to your fears. I hope it did not. Perhaps it is my orientation, knowing as I do many of the writers and artists who make their living in the comics industry, but I see no reason other than that arbitrarily imposed by certain editors and the Comics Code Authority for the low standards found in most comic books. Many of the artists working in the commercial comics field are top-grade—some of them also do work for us here and you've liked them—and the medium is not by its very nature restricted to a childish level. One has only to recall the brilliant job EC did with Ray Bradbury's stories—"The Flying Machine" in particular—to realize that the graphic art medium has hardly been plumbed on an adult level at all. This approach—an adult approach—is what we're trying to promote with* Fantastic Illustrated. *And our interest in such a feature not only predates* GALAXY's, *but has little in common with that magazine's. As I presently understand the case,* GALAXY *was looking for a promotional scheme to boost flagging sales (an industry-wide problem), heard about our interest in Bode, and offered him a sum about four times greater than we were prepared to offer, in return for a contract binding him exclusively to* GALAXY. *The general thrust of "Sunpot" was worked out between Bode and* GALAXY's *editors, who actually suggested the topless "Belinda Bump" character and the sexy symbolism of the strip, but who suffered second thoughts when it was published without materially affecting sales. In any case, please don't "pre-judge" anything we publish until we do publish it. It's your privilege to dislike a feature or story and your right to say so. But since in any case the* Fantastic Illustrated *feature will run only four pages, I hope that even if you consistantly dislike it you'll still find the* other *142 pages of this magazine worth while.*

—TW

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Dear Ted:

I really want to thank you for printing my letter in FANTASTIC. I was very surprised and I do believe I turned a happy shade of purple around the edges. I seem to remember my left antenna going green at the tip!

I want to congratulate you on the fine effect of this month's *Science Fiction in Dimension* and *Fantasy Fandom* together. I'm really glad to see a logical statement of the position of the Second Foundation—I can now proceed to slash out with confidence.

In the first place, I find the idea of anyone or any body of people deciding what science fiction is, should be and can't do rather ridiculous. It reminds me of nothing so much as the early English grammarians who firstly decided that the construction "to go" is the same thing as a Latin infinitive and then decreed that since a Latin infinitive is one word and can't be split, well, then, one shouldn't split "to go" either. Of course, I agree with a lot of the things Pierce complained about—I'm not overly fond of the Ballardian School myself—but I don't think that the literary worth of a work of fiction can fairly be judged on the philosophical point of view of the critic. To accuse the New Wave of concerning itself with "the abdication of responsibility," when that responsibility is only the arbitrary (as it must be if one is to accept it that God is Dead) opinion of a select few, and then to state that anything which does not show the fulfillment of this responsibility or the grave dangers of ignoring it isn't sf, is about as logical and rational as saying that FTL drives are impossible, hence not rational, and that any story involving one is not science fiction.

The fact is that *The Einstein Intersection* IS science fiction, "A Boy and His Dog" IS science fiction, damned good science fiction, by popular acclaim and mutual (if not unanimous) consent, and any attempt, for whatever purpose, to adjust this classification is as hopeless as trying to stop people from ending sentences with "to" and about as ill-founded (since we've been doing it since Hengist and Horsa or whoever).

Please understand that I am *not* disagreeing with the proposition that mankind can make it, with a little luck and a lot of sweat. Of course there ain't no such thing as a free lunch. I simply feel that to restrict science fiction to dealing with this is to deny a large part of what is accepted as science fiction, in which part are many works which sf should be proud of, as a division of literature and therefore an art form.

My personal definition of sf rather parallels Panshin's in his column this month. I have always felt that anything that does not concern the physical reality of the present world or the historical past is within the realm of science fiction. This of course includes fantasy, from Conan (but not Tros) to psychological fantasy like "The Good Trip" to *Glory Road*. It might also be said to include everything from Dracula to *Morte D'Arthur* to the *Odyssey*, but I think a definition that is too wide is far better than one which is too narrow, which restricts rather than encourages the imagination.

Eklund has done it again. I can't wait for him to write a novel. Do you know if he has one in the works yet??

I can't tell you how much I enjoyed "Always the Black Knight." I know I'm not the only one who longs to recreate the Elder Days, but it's kind of comforting to see the fact in print—and I know full well it's not what it's cracked up to be, and

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being reminded of *that* makes smog and the War and electric dishwashers that much easier to put up with.

Please get some more Jeff Jones covers—I leave them laying around and they're nice to look at. Ova Hamlet is an egghead. Peace.

Paula Marmor
8339 Pierce Dr.
Buena Park, Calif., 90620

Gordon Eklund has sold a novel to the Ace Science Fiction Specials line—and two more stories to us (plus a collaboration with Greg Benford) which you'll be seeing here or in AMAZING before long. —TW

Dear Mr. White,

I disagree with Paula Marmor's opinion about the *Prisoner* in her letter in the August issue. The show, rather then being "a drag and improbable," was an interesting one and about the best science fiction show going. Here in Cincinnati we had *Star Trek,* Japanese monster movies, and repeats of *Lost in Space, Science Fiction theater* and *The Outer Limits* to watch, either from here or from Dayton. *The Prisoner* clearly surpasses them all.

No, it did not reach the level of some of the classics of the field that had been written but it did set a new level for television. It was not a pasteboard world filled with cardboard people. It was about a man who was trying to maintain his identity and independent will. It centered around Drake (Number 6). As it showed his successes and failures it left the others a mite weak. No, the show was no soap opera in characterization but still it was very good for a science fiction show. For a science fiction show to be written, does it have to have "real people or real events"? In *Rite of Passage* by Panshin there are no real people or events but there are given people and events. These people are not real, just like Drake is not real to you. As it, the show, evolved it became better with most every item gaining in strength. A plot emerged and the whole story grew as a unit until the 17th segment. Then it ended.

You have become a fine magazine over the last year. *Fantastic* has changed greatly since you introduced the letter column last October. From the cheap little reprint magazine you have grown into a worthy contender for the major magazines. Happy Anniversary, Ted, on *Fantastic's* start of its 20th year.

Roger Boardman
10907 Maplehill Drive
Cincinnati, Ohio, 45240

Dear Mr. White:

What the hell post office, dammit? I got this letter back twice because that information wasn't at the head of your column! It came back twice for lack of zip-code! Because I refuse to knuckle under to a bunch of cotton-pickin' liars—who go around telling us nitwit peons all about the nice-shiny automatic electronic sorting machines—that don't exist and can't be built at the present state-of-the-art.

Aside from the obvious fraud aspect of Zip, I'm a people, not a number, dammit! While I cheerfully admit to holes in my head, I insist that they're uniquely mine—not put there with a card-punch. I don't need any more, that's for sure! Besides, the people I write to are responsible citizens, despite the Post Office's insistence on changing their addresses to something that sounds suspiciously like prison cell numbers. *(It's nits like you who succeed in annoying me. How you can excuse your rampant and errant stupidity by laying proud claim to*

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the notion that the holes in your head are, by God, unique, escapes me. Try real hard to understand this, now: the address at the head of this column is a full and complete address, and unless the Post Office misreads it (as has happened at least once) it will suffice to deliver your mail to me. The zipcode is an essential part of that address, whether read by a human being or a machine, sorted by hand or electronics. The last two numbers in that code are the local zone numbers—without which mail addressed to a post office box is undeliverable. You might as well complain about the "Box 73," or indeed your own street address. (Why not pick a name for your home and insist upon it as your address? Don't let the thought of the chaos which would ensue if your neighbors all did the same thing deter you. Obviously, you *are a* person, *not a* number!) *Your rationalization that the Post Office lacks "nice-shiny automatic electronic sorting machines"* (sic) *is as cheap and as false as the rest of your argument. The fact is that the Post Office had some automated sorting machines in operation as early as twelve years ago, when I worked briefly in the Baltimore Post Office. More are now in existence, including machines which read handwriting—despite your disbelief in the present "state-of-the-art". But any kind of massively-used sorting system must depend upon the uniform use of a system like the zipcode, and the resistence of such people as yourself to this or any other attempt to modernize, upgrade and improve the postal system is the largest factor undermining it. Pull your head out of the sand and start examining the facts of the matter instead of spouting off in obvious display of your ignorance. —TW)*

I wonder whether your penchant for controversy can stand a takeoff on your editorial about sf, drugs and the Tate killings?

This is an age when many people find existence intolerable. Some seek escape through booze, some through suicide and crime, a thousand other ways—and some of the milder cases turn to sf and/or drugs. In short, I feel strongly that sf and drugs tend to attract the same people, so we might logically expect to find them together.

Police and narcotics agents have always watched sf conventions for drug-users—with a great deal of success. The police were especially active at St. Louiscon, as many who had their rooms searched know. The Tate killings serve only to focus public attention on this, rather than plant any new thoughts in official hands. *(Presuming for a moment that you're serious in saying this, I suspect you have your facts wrong. To my knowledge there has never been a drug-arrest at a sf convention, despite such room-searches as you describe. It is my impression that those searches were a case of hotel-harrassment, and nothing more. If indeed "police and narcotics agents" have "always" watched sf conventions, it is news to me—and I co-chaired the 1967 World S.F. Convention. —TW)*

Your editorial got me to thinking, and all of a sudden it dawned on me that I have always associated sf with drugs. I even wrote a crank letter like this to another mag, in which I said that I "became addicted" to sf at an early age via Buck Rogers, and "graduated to mainlining" later via the printed word.

The oddity of *Stranger in a Strange Land* becoming Manson's bible is more odd than your editorial stated. There are persistent rumors of the same thing

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happening elsewhere. Among others, St. Louis also has a small cult based on *Stranger*.

However, the St. Louis group has curtailed their use of drugs and started taking stands on pollution, poverty and other social problems. Since they started down this road, they have begun to grow slowly, are all duly incorporated, their leader has performed perfectly legal marriages, and now they have a building of their own for an activity center.

In examining *Stranger*, I see little difference between it and a dozen other novels dealing with mass movements. *Dune* and Bug Jack Barron in particular could easily have served the purpose.

It is my belief that *Stranger* is an accident of timing. As I recall, it was at about its first flush of popularity just as the Supreme Court handed down its decision upholding the right of the Native American Church to use drugs *(specifically, Peyote. —TW)* in their religious rituals.

It seems inevitable that such a decision would spark dozens of little religious cults whose rites included the use of drugs. This is exactly what happened. Since a religion must have a creed to be legal, and since drugs and sf seem closely associated, it seems to me only natural that the current mass-movement sf novel would find itself becoming a bible for these cults. That was *Stranger in a Strange Land. (What about Huxley's* Island? *It not only included the use of psychedelic drugs in its rituals, but offered a far more detailed "bible" for a utopian philosophy and life-style. It also came out in the early sixties. Why didn't it catch on? —TW)*

I wouldn't want anyone to think I am necessarily putting sf down.

I regard escapism, properly directed, as a valuable social force. It is escapism which drives philosophers to dream up new societies which would be free of the things which render today's world so unpleasant. It is escapism which drives politicians to adopt those philosophies and try them—eventually to winnow from the thousands of available philosophies one which is better than today's.

Sf is in reality the philosopher displaying his ideas for the politician to examine. In that sense, sf is potentially the most valuable social information media in the field today. The drugs which follow it are a small price to pay for the benefits received.

Eugene Austin
608 Kingsland Ave.
University City, Mo.

Dear Mr. White,

Your editorial was thoughtful, interesting (even though I don't agree with your assessment of *Stranger in a Strange Land)* and probably too hopeful. People do hope that "this too shall pass" because how long could we lead any sort of life if we really believed that we have very little time left? I hope I'm wrong, but there are so many things that could destroy *at least* our civilization: overpopulation, pollution of the air and water, destruction of natural resources which certainly aren't infinite, not to mention war. And not enough is being done to combat these evils. There are antipollution campaigns, but pollution is continuing. There are planned parenthood centers, but there remains ignorance and the Pope. There are peace movements and draft resistors, but nations continue their childish quarrels and the end of the war (just *this* one) isn't even in sight.

I hope that *only* our civilization is

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destroyed. My optimism consists of a belief that mankind will somehow survive, and perhaps will be smarter the next time around. How long do we have? Thirty years? *(At one time the* Bulletin of Atomic Scientists *used a clock face for its cover, with the hands standing a few minutes before midnight. As cold-war tensions eased, the hands moved back. When they grew worse, the hands moved closer to midnight. In my mind I maintain a similar timetable: at times I've projected The Chaos to come within less than a decade, at other times twenty-five years or more in the future. There's no guessing, but optimism—in which we all persist—seems at times foolhardy. Yet, as you say, how could we go on without it? —TW)*

I disagree with Paula Marmor's opinion of *The Prisoner*. In the first place, whether the Village was "improbable" or not is beside the point. (I didn't find it that unbelievable that a government would go to such lengths.) Is Kafka's *The Trial* something likely to have happened? Or, at the other end of the spectrum—I would hardly call the premise behind *The Beverly Hillbillies* likely. But *The Prisoner is* a parable—it is not dealing with an imaginary village, but with our society. I didn't find it emotionally uninvolving. Number Six was reacting towards others as might be expected—he never knew whom he could trust, so he shied away from getting involved with them . . . which occasionally led to his (temporary) downfall. The program as a whole was far from boring, and many of the episodes were gripping and emotionally involving.

Peace.

Lisa Tuttle
6 Pine Forest Circle
Houston, Texas, 77027

More or less as a consequence of his review here of The Prisoner *series and the first two books, Hank Stine was given the opportunity to write the third novel,* The Prisoner #3, A Day in the Life, *Ace Books no. 67902. —Ted White*

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79)

forward, nose down, *not dare look out got six-and-a-half miles to go take some minutes get this into him fight the controls Kirk Douglas pull out that interfering Portuguese kick his*

"This man is having a coronary attack, sir," said the Portuguese doctor. Over his shoulder, Tindale caught a glimpse of the passengers, terrified, felt their fear hit him in the viscera, saw the steep angle of the plane.

"Keep out of this, will you?"

"I must help you, sir! You are mad—we crash! *Onde esta . . .? Socorro, socorro!"*

Tindale tried pushing the man out of the way. *They grappled* The man called for help. Tindale hit him with his left fist. *They grappled* The man tried to seize his arm, failed, hit him in the face. Tindale dropped the phial and let him have it. Yarborough was quieter now, his face distorted. Three men rushed in, and Tindale hit out at them too. *They grappled, they grappled* They fell against the instrument panel. Glancing over a shoulder, he saw the sea rush up.

Mary Mary blinding me too sucking late pull out lurke prison bars pray oh pray race of immortal fish cooling frying God before you get too old locked in locked out Mary Walter ear to ear depend for my immortality on their mortality the hatch must be hatch never die

—Brian W. Aldiss

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Angeles, shortly after he'd emigrated from New Zealand. Mike was even then an artist of considerable talent, and was making his way in commercial art and design. He moved to New York City eight or so years later, to work at a succession of advertising agency jobs, and he too became involved with me in the *STELLAR* project.

Oddly enough, Mike had never been able to interest any sf publisher in his work, although he was successful in other fields. I suspect it was a case of his ideas being too fresh, too original, too different for tradition-bound publishers to accept. To me his enormous talent was immediately obvious, and I felt it a crime and a shame that he had no outlet for his work within our field. Thus it was that when we changed and upgraded these magazines I asked him to do the department head designs, and began giving him story-illustration assignments. I've been quite pleased—indeed, proud—of the work he has done for us, and the proof of it has been your enthusiastic response and the acclaim of his fellow professional artists. His first cover for us appeared last month on AMAZING, and you'll be seeing one on this magazine soon.

Mike's work for us intrigued Jeff, and Jeff in turn decided he wanted to contribute. The result has been a series of outstanding covers—and you've seen nothing yet!—and some of Jeff's best black and white drawings.

Between Mike and Jeff, the standards were set. Both move within a loosely organized community of young New York artists, and their enthusiasm, as well as their work, inspired other artists to request work from us. One of the first was Mike Kaluta.

Mike's style uniquely complements those of Hinge and Jones: to me there is something nostalgically evocative in his work. I see something of the storybook illustrators of earlier times in his black and white work, while his color work—his painting on this issue—has traces of Jones, Frazetta, and perhaps even J. Allen St. John, while obviously borrowing from none of them.

These three artists—Kaluta, Jones and Hinge—form the basic illustrating "staff" for AMAZING and FANTASTIC, but their work has in turn brought us the work of others. Steve Harper, for example, is a friend of Kaluta's. Steve did an illustration for our August issue and the cover for our next issue. Dan Adkins phoned me from Ohio to say that he was so impressed by the work we were publishing that he wanted to rejoin us—and did so with both an impressive illustration in the August issue and several cover paintings we've purchased since. And so it goes. Our most recent addition is Sid Check. Some of you may remember Sid as one of Wally Wood's collaborators some twenty years ago; his present style is not unlike that of Gray Morrow (who, in turn, has done work for us despite his heavy schedule, as something of a favor).

Because our art budget is not large, I feel personally indebted to each of these men—and to the others whose work you'll see in these pages sooner or later—for the time and care they've put into their art for us. It has to be a labor of love on their part, and public acknowledgement is overdue them.

After our mixup with the *Fantastic Illustrated* department in the August issue and last issue, it is rather anticlimactic to report that it was squeezed out of this issue. However, it

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will return, next issue, if the Fates are kind. As I may not have explained adequately, the feature is not intended to present the continuing work of any one artist, but to showcase a number of artists in successive issues. I have asked of each artist involved only that his feature be limited to four pages and that it be related to sf or fantasy. I want each artist to treat it as something more than a "comic book" feature: there is so much more that can be done with graphic art than a medium aimed at eight-year-olds will allow.

As something of a postscript to my discussion of the case in previous issues, Vaughn Bode has again severed his ties with *GALAXY*—after the fourth installment of his "Sunpot" feature was tampered with and the fifth and sixth rejected outright—and will be doing work for us in the future. He will not be finishing out "Sunpot" here, for legal reasons, but will be doing original four-page stories, two of which (at least) will have matching covers by Vaughn and Larry Todd in collaboration. Vaughn tells me his "Deadbone" strip from *CAVALIER* will be collected and published shortly by Bantam Books.

A recent letter from Ursula K. Le Guin says, among other things, "Finally, may I congratulate you on the rejuvenation of FANTASTIC and AMAZING—you have done a magnificent job. It's great to have them back again, to see them publishing young writers' work again, to see David R. Bunch's stories again! There are so few magazines in s.f. now, and these two fill a very necessary place . . . I feel a real loyalty to the magazine, FANTASTIC, which first bought one of my stories, and it was a real pleasure to have a story in it again, and in good company too."

Coincidentally, in the same mail was a letter from a reader, Ed Eatinger of Elsinore, California, which began in this fashion: "I won't delve into why Ursula Le Guin wrote 'The Good Trip' in the August issue. I'm sure there's a point to the story someplace, even if I cannot fathom it. However, I must ask: 'Why did *you* print it?' The story may have some interest for a hippie, reading it in his favorite underground newspaper, while dragging on a joint, but I wonder how many FANTASTIC readers found it interesting, much less entertaining! This brings me to the main point of this letter. I simply don't think you're publishing enough *fantasy* in FANTASTIC. There is virtually *no* distinction between FANTASTIC and her sister magazine, AMAZING. I gathered from an editorial of yours a few issues ago that FANTASTIC would be devoted *purely* to fantasy. Well, since then we've had a cross-section of almost every kind of imaginative fiction from sf (note cover of August issue) to incomprehensible nonsense like "The Good Trip," but very little true fantasy. You simply *must* do *something* to set FANTASTIC apart from AMAZING. The best way to start is by limiting *all* science fiction to AMAZING, and feature pure *fantasy*, particularly of the supernatural vein."

Obviously I disagree with Ed. Indeed, I regard the bulk of the stories FANTASTIC prints to be fantasy (as opposed to science fiction) and appropriate only to this magazine. A case in point would definitely be "The Good Trip" (which I happened to understand reasonably well and which I obviously liked). It was clearly fantasy (as I defined "fantasy" in my editorial in the February issue—to which Eatinger refers) in that it related surreal events. In this issue Alexei

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Panshin points out the limitations of the form we call "science fiction," and the broader scope of what he has christened "creative fantasy." I like that term, because I think it fits quite well what is now happening in FANTASTIC.

At present only this magazine and *F&SF* are conceived as capable of embracing the entire panopy of "creative fantasy," of which science fiction is one sub-type. Equally, FANTASTIC welcomes a broader spectrum of approaches to fiction—from the surreal to the humorous, etc. In this issue, for example, we cover a vast spectrum of "creative fantasy". Keith Laumer's new serial would have been called "science fantasy" a few years back: a technological gloss laid over basically "magical" situations and events. In this respect, as well as its rather light-hearted approach in spots, "The Shape Changer" reminds me of the semi-humorous fantasy novels *UNKNOWN* used to publish.

Brian Aldiss' "Cardiac Arrest," on the other hand, could be considered sf—or even almost contemporary, considering its approach. I could have published it in AMAZING (alone of the stories in this issue), but it appears here in the interests of balance.

I suspect the sort of story Ed wants to see is "Walk of the Midnight Demon," since Gerard Conway has managed to blend heroic adventure with the supernatural here. On the other hand, "Been a Long, Long Time" is also "supernatural" in a sense, although it owes more to the tradition of tall tales—out of which Lafferty most often works.

"Battered Like A Brass Bippy" is a satire, of course, as are all the Ova Hamlet stories (we have another in the works, "War of the Doom Zombies," an Upchuk the Barbarian story)—and this one is more peripherally fantasy than most. Lupoff asked me if I'd prefer a more "sf" setting, but it seemed to me it would only interfere with the story's real point.

Barry Malzberg is one of David Bunch's strongest admirers (his only request to me when I assumed editorship of these magazines was that I not sit on the Bunch story then in inventory), and I think the reason is obvious in "The New Rappacini," although Malzberg's narrative technique is very much his own. In this story, as in his "As Between Generations" in our last issue, Barry is speaking of viewpoint and attitude: he is very obviously extending the form in order to express himself.

There is very little overlap between any of these stories: each occupies its own niche in this issue. Obviously all may not be to any one reader's taste, but I suspect that each of you will find at least one strong favorite among them.

And that, as Miss Le Guin noted, is what this magazine is all about: a place where widely divergent stories can find publication, where a David Bunch and a Greg Benford, a Keith Laumer and a Gerard Conway, or a J.G. Ballard and a Gordon Eklund may find themselves with stories side-by-side.

—Ted White

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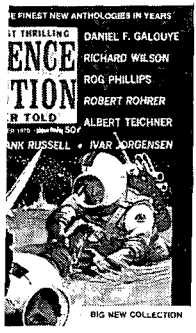

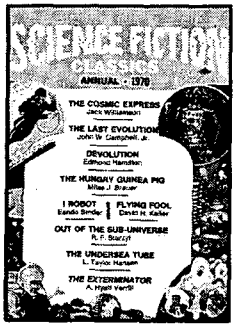

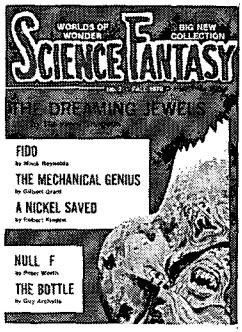

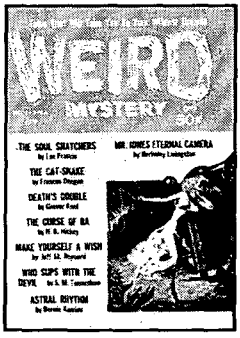

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